

# 空の罪界

からいのきよよつがご

the Garden of sinners

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奈須きのへ





# Empty Boundaries: Volume II

The Garden of Sibbers

by Kiyoko Nasu (奈須 きのこ)

# STORIES BY KINOKO NASU

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*Volume II: A Hallow, Paradox Spiral*

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## Part IV: A Hallow

That which is discordant.

That which is hated.

That which is intolerable.

Accept these things and all others, and never know pain.

That which is harmonious.

That which is desired.

That which is permitted.

Reject these things and all others, and know nothing but pain.

One affirms, one denies.

Between two hearts lies the hollow.

Between two minds lies emptiness.

Between two souls, I reside.

# A Hallow - I

"Hey, you've heard about the patient on the private room on the third floor, right?"

"Oh, who hasn't at this point? The word's been passed on from mouth to mouth since yesterday, and even that poker faced neurosurgeon Dr. Ashika had to show at least some surprise at that girl's sudden recovery. I couldn't believe it myself."

"No, no, I mean the story after that. What do you think the patient did after she woke up from her coma? Promise me you won't freak out or anything, okay, but she tried to crush her own eyes!"

"Come on, that's not true!"

"It is! Dr. Ashika's trying his best to keep it a secret, but I heard the story from one of his interns, so it has to be real. Apparently, she used her palm to put pressure on her eyes in like, the three seconds that Dr. Ashika wasn't looking. What a horror show."

"But with that girl in a coma for two years, she really shouldn't be able to move, right?"

"Yeah, but we basically exercised her limbs everyday to prevent the disuse atrophy. Her family even paid the hospital a mountain of cash just to make sure we do it. Still, it obviously can't completely stop it, and her body still has trouble moving. Probably why her attempt to destroy her eyes failed."

"Still, it's a rarity for a person in bed rest for two years to even move, let alone poke out her own eyes."

"That's why Dr. Ashika was surprised. Wait a minute; what do you call it when the blood vessels in the eye bleed?"

"Subconjunctival hemorrhage, was it? Don't tell me the girl got that too?"

"You know it. It's really supposed to heal by itself, but since the ocular trauma was so hard, she's temporarily blind on top of that. The intern told me that the patient just wanted her eyes bandaged, so that's what they did."

"What a shame. Even now that she's awake she still can't see anything. Makes my heart tighten a little."

"It does, doesn't it? And there's still the question of her aphasia. Seems she still can't speak, the poor thing. And since Dr. Alaya left last month we haven't had a therapist to handle her. But I hear Dr. Ashika's calling in someone he knows. Until she's regained some of her mental faculties

we're keeping her on a strict 'no visitors' policy. Even the parents are only getting a little time to spend with her."

"I see. That's too bad for our little boy."

"What? Which little boy?"

"Oh, you don't know! There's this little kid, right? Well, I guess we can't really call him a kid anymore, with his age and all. He's the one who brought that girl over here in the first place, and he still comes to visit every Saturday. I'm really rooting for him to meet her again."

"Oh, you mean *that* kid. The one everyone was giving nicknames to. I never realized he was still coming. Hard to find that level of sincerity these days, don't you think?"

"Yeah, he's the only one that's been coming to visit her these past two years. He even beat out her parents. Even I'm inclined to believe that part of that girl's miraculous recovery is because of him."

"I never thought you were *that* sentimental."

"That's alright. Neither did I."

Beyond and below lay only darkness. This void, lifeless place could only mean one thing: I was dead.

Without anything to even clothe me, I, Shiki Ryōgi, floated, and then sank slowly into the fathomless, lightless sea. There was no end in sight. There was nothing in sight, neither light, and yes, perhaps even darkness. This place was only a hollow, where all meaning ceased to be. A stygian abyss that could not be put into words, and without words it shall remain: a cypher called, simply, “ ”.

I fell deeper into the “ ”, and my naked body slowly acquired the pallor of the grave, and it made me want to look away. In my mind, I knew that everything in this place comes to be the same way.

“Is this death?” I whispered, though it came out so faint, I doubted if it was even real.

Though time too had no meaning inside “ ”, I observed it. Like a stream tracing out into the infinite, like the process of decay, I mark it. It was an eternity. I plunged ever deeper, and cast my eyes farther, and in that eternity, this place was still empty, devoid of anything except me. And yet, it was all so calm and serene. It feels as if, in this place without meaning, the fact that I existed at all fits me. Here lay entropy, the end of all things, a place the living may never observe, but only the dead may enter.

I died. And yet I am still alive. I felt my mind about to lose its grip.

Two years. An instant, stretched out to an eternity. Both are accurate measures of my time spent in this “ ”. Here, I touched death. Here, I fought for my life. Here, I awakened.

The light breeze through the window and the sound of boisterous activity outside my room stirs my mind to wake. I can hear nurses and patients alike scurrying in the corridor outside. The sound of their footsteps and the soft whispers of their conversations build to a low background hum, always present at a hospital in the early morning hours. Compared to how silent last night was, this sounded like some sort of convention, and a noisy one, as far as I was concerned. I liked my waking hours silent. Thankfully, in the secluded space of my private room, I’m sheltered from the worst of the noise.

It didn’t take long for a doctor to arrive and check up on me.

“How are we feeling today, Miss Ryōgi?”

Silence. It stumps him, and for a moment, we are both quiet.

"I see. At least you've seemed to calm down since last night. Unfortunately, since we didn't get the chance to do it last time, I'm going to have to explain your situation to you. Feel free to talk if you feel something's not right."

I didn't really have any interest in paying attention to him, but since it seems like he mistook my lack of a response for consent, it looks like I don't really have a choice in the matter.

"Then I'll tell you straight out: today is the fourteenth of June 1998. Two years ago, on the fifth of March, you were involved in a traffic accident, hit by a car in a pedestrian crossing at night. Then you were brought here, to this hospital. Do you remember anything that I'm saying?"

Silence from me again. The last thing I can remember is someone—a classmate, maybe?—standing stock still in the rain. As for the accident, nothing is coming to mind.

"Oh, don't worry if you can't remember it. When the accident occurred, it's likely you noticed the car and tried to jump out of the way. That's why there isn't any serious damage on your body. On the other hand, you did receive a strong hit on your head. You were already comatose when they brought you here, but it seems there's no brain damage. But your mental faculties might still be recovering from your two year coma. I can't say for sure if your memories will return, but it's looking that way, since last night's EEG detected no abnormalities in your brain activity. Anyway, the fact that you woke up from your coma is a miracle in itself. There's very little possibility of that after two years, you see."

Even though he makes a point to emphasize the length of my coma, it still isn't hitting home for me. For me, yesterday is still that rain-soaked night, followed by a vast hollow of emptiness.

"And if you're about to ask," the doctor continues, "your eyes are mostly fine. It's just a blunt injury, which rarely damages the eyes in a permanent way. We're lucky there wasn't anything sharp nearby last night. Another week or so, and we'll be able to take off the bandages so you can finally enjoy the nice scenery."

I detect a tiny hint of rebuke in his words this time. I suppose he's a bit frustrated with my little attempt to destroy my eyes. He was pretty persistent last night in asking me why I did it, but I couldn't answer then as well. They'd think I was crazy.

"You're locked into physical therapy sessions, one in the morning, and another in the afternoon. As for visiting hours, I'm afraid we're restricting it until your body and mind are back to normal: an hour a day. Bear with it for a while. Once you're done, you're out of here."

Well, that's a mood ruiner if there ever was one. Not having the heart to voice my cynicism so early in the morning, I instead try to test my right hand's responsiveness by moving it, and find that there is no change. Trying to kickstart it into action takes me a few seconds, and I can feel the joints and muscles straining as I make the most minute, yet painful movements. It almost feels like it isn't my own hand. I suppose it's what I should expect after two years of disuse.

"Well, that's it for this morning. Since you've seemed to calm down, I won't have a nurse watch over you all day today. If you need anything at all—water, a book—just press the button next to your pillow. The nurse's station is right down the hall," the doctor says in the gentle, practiced words designed to put a patient at ease. Were I able to see, I'd probably see him with a similarly rehearsed smile, one he probably practiced in the bathroom mirror all night. I hear him start to open the door, but stops to say one last thing. "Oh, yes, I almost forgot. You'll have another doctor starting tomorrow, for your speech condition. She's a bit closer to your age, so try to be less...stoic...around her. From what I see, you're going to need the expertise."

And so, after he left, I was alone again. I lie flat on the bed, arms over my eyes that I myself asked to be bandaged shut.

"My name is—", I whisper with dry lips still unused to speech, "Shiki Ryōgi." The same *Shiki* as before? Maybe not. Maybe she was killed, in those two years of emptiness. All of the memories of someone named *Shiki* Ryōgi are all there in my head, all ready for me to draw out. But what of it? What use are they to me, who died once and awoke? I feel so...disconnected to my past self. There's no mistaking I'm me, but the memories in my head don't feel like they are. It's like I'm watching a biopic. Main character: *Shiki* Ryōgi. Weird ghost image caught in some of the frames: me.

I bite my lips until I'm sure I'm still awake. It's all I have to make sure I'm still here. I'm a puzzle with a missing piece close to my chest, and the hole makes my insides feel as hollow as a cave with wind howling through it. I'm missing my reason for living.

"And so? What the fuck does it matter?" I mutter to myself with as much conviction as I can muster. And once I've said that, I feel less troubled by it. Strangely, this feeling of disquiet and irritation that scratches and pulls at my chest is sort of refreshing, in its own way. There's anxiety. There's pain. But those are feelings that the sixteen-year old *Shiki* still held on to. Me? I'm unimpressed. I don't know why I'm still alive but I have no inten-

tion of looking a gift horse in the mouth. Not like I feel alive in the first place anyway. I'm just here, now; nursing an existence of being adrift on the wind.

## I 2

Morning turns to night turns to morning again, and a new day comes, whether or not I can see the sunlight. I am strangely relieved that even without sight, I can feel the slow rise of morning. However, the reason for this relief remains a mystery, since the nurse that took my morning examination came and interrupted my thoughts. Before I knew it, she had finished, and left me alone again, but that wasn't the end of my day.

My mother and brother came to talk. They felt like strangers, and I couldn't come to grips with the reality that they were my relatives. Left with no alternative, I managed to mumble little words to them, in the manner that my memories told me *Shiki* would. It made my mother happy at least, and my brother seemed pleased. It all had the air of some comical farce, and we all played our parts to the letter.

Sometime past noon, I hear the door opening and a person step inside my room. As soon as I hear the clicking heels, I immediately know that it isn't anyone familiar. I remember that I was going to get a new doctor starting today, but before I could ask, the newcomer starts to speak.

"Hel-lo! Doing fine today?" says the newcomer, drawing out her hello in an attempt at familiarity. A woman, judging from her voice. "Well, I must say, I expected someone that looked more ghastly, but look at you! Your skin is quite pretty. You're just the kind of girl I can talk to, I think. Now aren't I lucky?" Her voice is young, maybe somewhere in her 20's, and has the kind of lilting, up-and-down quality of someone who is too cheerful for her own good. I hear her make her way to the chair beside my bed and sit herself down.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," she continues. "I'm not a doctor from here so I don't come with an ID. Still, with your eyes covered and all, I don't think it'll be much of a problem. I'm a speech therapist. You know, for your aphasia and—"

"Aphasia? Who, me? I'm sorry; you must have me confused with someone else." And so I finally speak. She seems like a person worth messing with, so I cut her off mid sentence. It doesn't seem to faze her however, since she responds with an "Mmhmm", with what must have been an accompanying nod of the head.

"Now, normally I'd be angry, but since I already know that your aphasia is a misdiagnosis, I'll let it slide. That Ashika is such a by-the-books doctor;

he can't handle special cases like yours. But hey, it's not like you can't share the blame for that. Obviously you're going to raise some suspicion if you keep your mouth shut like you've been doing." She makes a friendly, amused chuckle. For some reason, I'm imagining her wearing glasses. She just seems like the type.

"So they think I have aphasia?"

"Yep. After all, you did hurt your brain some in the accident, so they must have thought that the part of your brain that puts words in your mouth was damaged. But it's not that isn't it? You're just a stubborn young girl with some issues. That having been said, it's beginning to look like I'm not needed, but I don't want to get fired a minute into the job. And since my other job isn't exactly overflowing with customers, I think I'll keep you company."

Well, a minute into her job and she's already proved herself to be an annoyance I can hardly stomach. I reach a hand out for the button to call a nurse, but the doctor is faster. I feel her hand reach it first and she deftly maneuvers the wire from my reach.

"What the hell, lady?" I utter in indignation.

"Whew, that was close. If you tell Ashika now, the gig is up. Come on, let's cut a deal here. You pretend to have aphasia and I won't ask you any stupid questions, they won't call in a new doctor, and I get to earn some money on the side. That way we both benefit. How about it?"

Well, I have to admit, that sounds like a nice proposition, but definitely illegal on some level. Still, I have to wonder what kind of person this woman is when she can just belt out something like that without hesitation. I turn my bandaged eyes to where her voice is coming from, hoping I am looking straight at her.

"You're not a real doctor, are you?" I ask.

"Right on the first try. I make a living as a...magician, of sorts."

Oh, brother. This just took a turn for the crazy.

"Don't have a need for a con artist."

She replies with a chuckle. "I suppose not. A magician can't fill the hollow in your soul, after all. Only a regular person can do that."

"W—wait a minute, what did you just say?"

"Oh, you *must* have noticed it. See, you're all alone now." The lilt in her voice that I first perceived as cheerful now grants a menacing air to her speech. I hear her stifle the urge for one last chuckle, and then standing up and walking across the room towards the door. "Doesn't look like you're in the mood to talk today, so let's leave it at that for now. We'll try again tomorrow. By—e."

By the time she said goodbye, the cheerfulness had returned to her voice. The sound of the door opening and closing signal her sudden departure, as abruptly as she'd arrived.

With difficulty, I put my right hand on my lips. I was speechless at what she'd said.

*All alone. A hollow in the soul.* It is those words that make me remember.

Oh no. Oh, dear God no. How could I forget him?

I can't find him. In my mind, I call out, over and over, and he, the other me, doesn't answer. **Shiki** Ryōgi is gone. *He's gone.*

**Shiki** was once one of those people who suffered another personality, sleeping and residing within her. The reason for it was simple. It was a trait, passed down through generations in the bloodline of the Ryōgi. The legends tell vaguely of some long past flirtation with the occult and arcane, but I don't know if that can be believed. This trait, which in a normal family would have been cursed, was instead celebrated and honed, an indication of a state of grace. Those born with it are treated as the heirs to the dynasty.

And so it was with **Shiki**, who was made the heir even over her older brother. She was an aberrant case. The alternate personality will always be a different gender than the actual person. Among the male Yang and the female Yin, the male personality usually emerges as the dominant. In those who carried the trait, all have been born male, but carried a female personality within them. **Shiki** was the first female born. Inside her was another, the man named **Shiki**.

For the most part, the one that controlled the body was still **Shiki**—me, in other words. **Shiki** represented all of my more base aspects and all of the thoughts I struggled to repress. **Shiki** lived only by continually stifling and killing the darkness within herself called **Shiki**, over and over, until it was the only way she knew how to act normally. Not that **Shiki** had a problem with that. He seemed quite content to lie dormant the majority of the time, while I call him out in times where I needed his particular brand of aggressiveness, such as in sword sparring. Always, he would come to surface, glad to have the chance to be out, but at the same time bored and resigned to his role.

At first it might seem like a relationship between a master and a servant, but the truth was much more complicated. In the end, **Shiki** and **Shiki** were one person. Whatever **Shiki** did, **Shiki** also desired, and when **Shiki's** desires were suppressed, it was done entirely through his own volition. Which was fortunate, since **Shiki** had what might be called...

homicidal tendencies. Now, as far as I knew, he didn't actually commit any murder...maybe. But what's true is that he continually dreamed of the act of murdering his fellow man. *Shiki* expressly forbade it, and tried her best to ignore it. But even as they ignored each other, they would never be separated. Isolated as *Shiki* was from the normalcy of the outside world, she was never lonely, thanks to **Shiki**.

But the time finally came when the cracks in that connection began to show. It was two years ago, *Shiki's* first year of high school. **Shiki** had never shown any desire to use the body, but it was the first time he had wanted to surface and take control. From then onwards, *Shiki* suffered from gaps in her memory, spaces where she couldn't remember what happened and what she was doing.

As for me, the memories from my freshman year up until the accident are gone. I can only recall fragments, lost without context: me standing in the scene of a homicide, throat dry, staring at the dark red blood.

One other series of images stands out: The memory of a classroom bathed in sunset, giving it the same vivid red hue that dominates both recollections, the classmate who destroyed *Shiki*, the one Shiki wanted to kill, and the one last piece of an ideal, normal life that Shiki wanted so much to protect. And since waking up from the coma, the name of that classmate has remained out of reach, no matter how hard I try.

The hospital has its own rhythm, its own sort of respiration. The raucous noise of the morning eventually dims slowly into the almost absolute silence of the night. Occasionally, the sound of slippers echoing in the corridor breaks the placidity, and is my only reminder that I am still awake. The black shroud that blinds me now serves only to highlight how alone I am, an entirely foreign sensation that *Shiki* never had. She was never alone.

But now **Shiki** is gone, and his loss is keenly felt. In fact, the only way I know I am me and not him right now is because I can't feel his presence.

"Probably the worst way to know your identity: identifying yourself because of what you lost, because of what you aren't." "I take a shot at some good, old-fashioned self-loathing, but it isn't helping. I wish I was just a little sad. That at least would be a change from the hollow soul that the "doctor" said I had. Like the husk of some old ship, its worth nothing without anything inside it. If so, what goes inside?"

I'd...go inside.

A whispering, coming from somewhere in the room. I can feel air rush in from the corridor outside, can hear the almost inaudible creak of the door

opening. I try to tell myself I'm imagining it, but I turn to the direction of the sound all the same.

A flickering, almost numinous white haze. I shouldn't be able to see it, but it makes a mockery of that statement. Amidst the complete darkness, it's the only thing I can see. It stands, vaguely like a human, but without bones to hold it up, in a state of being somewhere in between liquid and gas. It travels towards me, flowing and spreading at the same time in a disgusting motion. I am helpless, unable to move my body, so I can do nothing but wait for it.

At least it has a form I can comprehend. Things without form are the truly frightening things. At least, with a shape, your mind can understand it. I don't sense any hostile intent from this spirit, if that is even what it is. It's even strangely comforting. For how different are we really, this thing that doesn't live, and me who has no reason to live?

The spirit caresses me in the cheek, at which point my entire body freezes, the sensation feeling like someone pouring ice water on my spine. It hurts, but I can't move. I can't even scream. I can only witness it. We stay that way, unmoving, from midnight until the sun starts to come up. At the crack of early morning, I feel it melting away, like a desiccated slug. As soon as I feel the icy grip loosening, I fall into deep sleep.

# I 3

Several days have passed since I first woke from the coma, but the doctors have seen fit to keep my eyes bandaged for now. In a marked shift from the noise which I had come to think was standard hospital policy, this particular morning is so peaceful I lose myself taking in the little motions of the day. I can hear the birds chirping outside my window, feel the daylight shining through it, and I allow my lungs to be filled with the crisp air.

Yes, compared to the world I was in for two years, this world is truly a sight to behold. But with each morning that I wake up to the sprawling life of the world, I think: this world is only as happy as people are alone. The safest way to live is to be alone, but why can't people think that that's enough?

Once, I had a perfect setup. I didn't need anyone else. But the circumstances have conspired to make me wait for the part that I seem to lack, and if current trends are any indication, I might have to wait forever.

But what, or who, exactly am I waiting for?

My conversations with the “speech therapist-slash-magician”, such as she was, became a daily affair. In a hospital life full of batteries of tests and therapy sessions, it's become something to look forward to; a welcome respite from the day-to-day banality. Now, as always, our conversation takes a turn back to my past, and as always, she is positioned in the chair by my bed, talking in her own carefree manner.

“Mmm, now I see. So it's not that **Shiki** couldn't control the body, just that he showed no desire to do it. You—well, both of you—are proving to be quite the amusing couple.”

She had come suspiciously armed with some very extensive knowledge of my background, some of which I know for a fact only a few people know. She knew the curse behind the Ryōgi dynasty, the most tightly kept secret of the family. She knew of my limited involvement in the serial killing that wracked the city two years ago; details which I would normally be much more secretive about, but I've long since resigned myself to the outcome and consequences, though the crime and perpetrator remain ambiguous, even inside my head. I find not having to think about it has made for a less stressful thinking environment.

“There's nothing amusing about having a dual personality,” I impulsively interject.

She clicks her teeth in disappointment. “A cute label, but not accurate, I’d say. Both of you exist simultaneously, each of you having your own will: a recipe for dissociation. And yet, you both perform the same actions. It’s complicated, and the label ‘dual personality’ doesn’t do it justice. Something like ‘composite independent personality’ seems more fitting.”

“Hey, tack on a ‘republic’ in the end there and it’ll sound like some new Balkan country.”

“Ah, well, I never said I was good with names. Still, I do find it weird that, according to you, **Shiki** always slept, even though he didn’t need to.”

A matter only I could probably answer. It had always been that way. **Shiki** had always liked to dream, to be off in some astral adventure somewhere in his own imagining, an act that *Shiki* had never shown any interest in.

“So, is he still sleeping now?” she prods playfully, but I find that I can’t answer her. “Then he really is dead, isn’t he? He took your place as the consciousness that died during the accident, and the memories that he took in became lost to oblivion. Explains the gaps in your memories, at least. And without those memories, the knowledge of how involved you were to the serial killing two years ago might be lost forever.”

“So I’m assuming the suspect is still at large?”

“Indeed, but you know how this city plays. We say ‘oh, dear’ at a serial murder we see on TV, and then go back to eating our dinner. To most of the city in the last two years, it’s become some sort of bad joke. The rest have just forgotten.” She laughs, leaving in doubt how much of her statement she actually believed. “**Shiki** still puzzles me, though. If he hadn’t done anything, it would have been the *Shiki* consciousness that died. What reason would he have for taking your place like he did?”

“To be honest, it’s still something *I’m* thinking about,” I say with hesitation. “But enough about him. Did you bring the scissors I asked for?”

“Sorry, but Ashika and the rest of his minions didn’t allow it. You have, um...well, a history with your eyes, so they’re not allowing anything sharp.”

Well, I can’t say I didn’t expect anything less. I’ve been doing pretty well with my physical therapy, and I’ve even been able to move my body. They said it’s the first time they saw someone recover so fast with just two PT sessions every day. As a sort of celebration, I asked for a pair of scissors from the good doctor.

“What were you going to use the scissors for anyway? Flower arrangement on your bedside table?”

“Hell no. I just wanted to cut my hair, that’s all.” The hair problem has been bothering me ever since I woke up from my coma. It’s become quite

long in the span of two years. Every time I move my head it keeps tickling my neck and back, and is probably the strongest proof I have of how infuriatingly burdening long hair is.

"You should have just said so, then! It's easy enough for me to call in a hairdresser if you don't want to talk."

"Thanks, but no thanks. Can't stand 'em. I will not be held responsible for what I do when someone other than me does things to my hair."

"Oh, I totally know what you mean. We women do have to take care of our hair. You know, I really am jealous of you that your hair growing longer seems to be the only indication that you've aged." I hear the sound of her standing up. "So! Since I couldn't bring you scissors, let me just leave you with another thing. It's not much, but I'm sure it'll be fine. It's a stone with some rune inscriptions on it. Think of it as a protective charm. I'll put it over the door, so it's important that you not let anyone take it off."

Now I hear the sound of her dragging the chair to the door, after which she must be using it to put the rune in place. Then, she opens the door.

"Well, guess that's it for now. Someone else might be coming tomorrow, so do be a good girl until then." She departs then, leaving me only with those strange words and the rune.

Night has fallen, and midnight has past, but my usual visitor hasn't revealed himself yet.

Each midnight, without fail, the hazy spirit comes. Tonight proves to be the exception. Each night, as with the first, it had always given me a loving caress, always on the cheek. It was painful, and perhaps even dangerous, but I couldn't care less even if he did choose to eventually kill me. It'd probably be a much simpler affair.

In the dark, I brush the bandages wrapped around my eyes lightly with a finger. It won't be long now until my eyesight recovers. There remains one thing to do before that happens, however: to destroy my eyes; this time, with no room for error.

Without sight, I cannot see them, but it's only a matter of time before they are revealed again. If having sight means to keep seeing those...things that must not be seen, then the choice is obvious. It's much, much more preferable to never see the world than to ever see those *things* again. Still, maybe there is some other way. It's the last resort until I can find some other means to live.

Man, I am pathetic.

The *Shiki* of the past would have destroyed her eyes without a single

word or thought to the contrary. I, on the other hand, am hesitating. Not enough will to live, but not enough to die either. If that spirit ever gets it in its head to kill me for some reason, I probably won't cheer it on, but I probably won't raise a hand in defiance either.

# A Hallow - II

For most everyone else in the world during the laid back days of early June of 1998, it was as calm and easy a summer as any other. For Tōko Aozaki, it was the season she would first come to know the intriguing personality known as Shiki Ryōgi. It all began when Tōko had just taken in a new hire, impressed by the boy's ability to track her down despite her preventative efforts. As fate would have it, this new hire apparently had a yarn to spin about his friend, the previously mentioned Shiki, and as a way to pass the time on a particularly lazy afternoon, Tōko decided to listen to him.

Apparently this Shiki was in a coma, brought on after a car accident. She was in a persistent vegetative state, where the chances of waking up are below zero with the decimal numbers going into extreme lengths. It seems that he also heard, from the nurses' gossip at least, that Shiki hadn't aged a day since her coma, a little detail that Tōko had been immediately suspicious of.

"Really now? Even the dead haven't seen the end of entropy yet." she had said, trying to hide the curiosity in her voice. "Sounds a bit like...magic, doesn't it?"

"I don't expect you to believe it, ma'am, but it's true. There's not a spot of the last two years on her. Still, enough about my personal hang-ups. I don't suppose you have any curious coma stories to match mine, do you ma'am?"

He hadn't expected Tōko to take him seriously, but nevertheless, she folded her arms and tried to dig up a story. "Let's see now—there was this story from some far off country where a woman got married then promptly fell into a coma when she was twenty years old. God knows what the reason was, though. Rude of her, huh? Anyway, her particular case lasted for fifty years. Heard of it?"

"Can't say I have," said the boy, shaking his head. "So what happened to her after she woke up?"

"A surprisingly healthy mental state. Almost like she never even went into a coma! Can you imagine? She started recalling past memories, names; the whole deal. Sad that it didn't do anything to make the husband happy, though."

"What? Why would the husband be sad after her wife recovered?"

"Well, it's more the wife's problem, really. Her mind was as fresh as it was before the coma, but her body's taken the atrophy train to seventy

year old land. She wanted to run, go exercise, do athletics, but she obviously couldn't, and she couldn't really understand why. The fact that she'd aged fifty years just didn't register as the truth in her mind. The husband on the other hand, felt so bad for the wife that he actually said, with tears coming out of his eyes, that it might have been better for everyone if she hadn't woken up." She said all this as she relaxed in her chair, swinging it from side to side lazily. "How about it, huh? Now *that's* a story I don't expect *you* to believe. Hope it helped contextualize this entire thing for you."

After Tōko told this story, the boy fell silent, prompting her to speak and prod him into conversation again.

"Oh, but has a bad premonition suddenly crept into the little man's head?" Tōko asks with a playful grin from cheek to cheek decorating her face. The boy nods in assent.

"It's a thought I've never wanted to entertain, actually: the thought that Shiki might not actually want to come back."

"Ah, but what's this?" Tōko suddenly said, putting a hand on her temple and pretending to be a psychic. "I sense a reason behind this. We've got a lot of time to kill, so please, do tell." The boy seemed angered at this approach, and turns away.

"I'd really rather not, ma'am. You know, it wouldn't hurt to be a bit more sensitive to people."

"Hey, you're the one that started talking about her in the first place, friend. Don't start telling stories if you don't like where they're leading. I'm only asking to pass the time, and because every time Azaka calls me, she always keeps yapping on about this 'Shiki' person. I mean, how on Earth can we women gossip when I don't even know the first thing about the person?"

As soon as Azaka's name is mentioned, the boy frowns in dismay. "I'd been meaning to ask at some point, ma'am, but where and how exactly did you and my sister meet?"

"Long story short, we met when I was on a trip to investigate a little case I was working on. We met, and due to circumstances beyond my control, she ended up finding out about me being a mage."

"Well, whatever. I would ask that you please refrain from pulling her in too much into your world, though," he said, the suspicion clear in his voice. "She's at a very delicate and impressionable age."

Tōko couldn't help but chuckle at that. "You don't know the half of it. I won't butt into your family problems, you have my word. And in exchange for that, let's go back to our previous topic and get me interested in this

Shiki person." She lights a cigarette and leaned forward on her desk, the head cradled in her hands positively beaming.

Seeing there was no talking Tōko out of it, the boy could only sigh as he started to tell the story that began two years ago, on the snowy night when he and *Shiki* first met. In high school as classmates, *Shiki* had showed no interest in making nice with the rest of the student body, but it was the boy who struck up a friendship with her. But in the second half of freshman year, around the time the serial killer started making him or herself known, *Shiki* became more aloof and withdrawn, a matter eventually explained when she eventually revealed to him that she suffered a split personality, one of which had a taste for murder. If and how she was connected to the serial killings was never found out. In a rain-soaked night colder than any that had come before, *Shiki* encountered an accident before the boy's very eyes. The boy and the girl were whisked away to a hospital, where she still resides in a coma.

At first, Tōko listened to this story as one would listen to any half-truth told over a beer, but as it progressed, the smile was slowly wiped from her face. At last, the boy finished relating the story, wearing a solemn expression of that told of how delicate a subject this must have been for him.

"So, I guess that's the long and the short of that particular two-year old story," he concludes.

"Well, she isn't some vampire in torpor, I can tell you that. Still, now I might have some idea..." Tōko's words descended into the particular brand of murmuring she has when she's pondering the solution to a hard problem. The smile that had disappeared from her face now returns, though this time as a sly curl of the lips. "Remind me again what character you use for her name."

"It's '*Shiki*' as in '*sūshiki*', or 'formula'. Why? Is there anything special about it?"

"Or, alternatively, the '*Shiki*' as in '*shikigami*', that unique Japanese style of goetic theurgy. And on top of that, she's a member of the Ryōgi dynasty. I'm beginning to see what this is all about, and it stinks of magic." Unable to contain herself, Tōko extinguished her cigarette on the ashtray and stands up. "The hospital was in the suburbs, wasn't it? I'll be back in a few. I just need to go see about this sleeping beauty of ours."

And without waiting for a reply from the boy, Tōko left her office, along with the boy, unable to think of anything except how exactly she had found herself in such a favorable position. She felt like she could almost feel the subtle rifts and changes in the skeins of fate, shifting to bring her here, at this singular point.

# A Hallow - III

The miracle of Shiki's recovery happened only a scant few days after that. According to the new hire, Shiki's parents had not even been allowed to talk to her for some reason, which meant that visits from him would be decidedly impossible. Because of this, the boy seemed to dive into the paperwork a little more readily, a little more fervently than Tōko had yet seen, perhaps as some means to distract himself.

"It really is far too dark in this office," Tōko mentions, to break the silence they had kept since the start of the day.

"Well, I could get a light for you, if you want, ma'am," he replies, monotone, without sparing even a glance to Tōko. She got the sense that he was thinking of something with the kind of anal diligence that were allowed only to absurd thoughts; half-baked ideas that one leaves to linger in the mind long enough to entertain the notion that they might actually be half-way sane. With this in mind, Tōko finally spoke to him frankly.

"You're free to stop looking so glum about it anytime, you know. Shiki, I mean. And don't even think about sneaking in there at night just to see her."

"I'm not thinking anything of the sort, ma'am. Besides, there're far too many guards around that place: a pair in the front door, and a handful patrolling the grounds."

*Mercy me, thinks Tōko, incredulous, he's already counted the guards and patrol routes. I just took him under my wing, so far be it from me to allow him to be a criminal overnight.* With a shrug of resignation, Tōko spoke. "I was going to play this one close to the chest, but you're leaving me without much choice here. I've pulled what strings and favors I can to get hired as a temp therapist in the hospital where your friend is. You hear that? I'm going to find out about Shiki Ryōgi for you, so don't you go running off doing something that'll get you arrested. It's the least I could do after hearing you tell that story when you didn't want to in the first place."

She sighed in what might have been an attempt to place a last bit of indifference to the whole situation. The boy, however, stood up, walked towards Tōko, and grasping each of her hands with one of his, he shook them up and down. Not realizing this was his way of expressing his gratitude, she gave him an awkward look, saying, "Right—*weird*. Gotcha."

"This is so surprising, Miss Tōko! I didn't think you'd have it in you to possess the compassion of the average person, ma'am!"

"Now see, you could've taken this in quiet celebration. But instead, you

had to go and destroy your chances of ever having a raise.”

“Oh, sorry, slip of the tongue,” he says quickly, trying to gloss over it as fast as possible. “So that’s why you’re wearing a fancy suit today. Yes, quite stylish. It looks so good, I almost don’t recognize you.”

“Um, well I always dress this way, but fine, feel free to keep up the compliments. Lord knows I don’t get enough of them.” Sensing that the boy would barrel right on through whatever she said, Tōko quickly tried to get back on track. “So, with that business out of the way, I expect you not to do anything as stupid as your age might imply. Something’s not right with that hospital, and I’m not sure what, but you don’t need to get involved in it. You just stay here and do some crosswords or something while I’m out.”

Those last sentences put a damper on the boy’s otherwise infectious enthusiasm, and when he finally calmed down, he asked, “What do you mean something’s not right?”

“I can feel the resonance of magic there, a ward maybe, put up by a mage other than me. Whoever it is, his or her objective probably isn’t Shiki, or they wouldn’t have waited so courteously for two years for me to pop into the picture.” A lie and Tōko knew it. The machinations of mages were often marked by their forethought and patience, and there wouldn’t have been a reason for any mage to act before Shiki awakened, but now she has. The boy need not know all of that, and fortunately, it seemed that Tōko bluffed it well enough for him to be satisfied.

“Um, ma’am, when you say a ‘ward’, you mean something like what you’ve set up on this building, right?”

“You got the gist of it. Wards are nifty little spells centering around controlling a slice of space. Some mages like to conjure up actual physical walls, but others are a bit more subtle, veiling a place to induce a mental urging on anyone that doesn’t know or have business with the mage to go away. Best part? People never notice it. To them, it’s just some gut feeling that they should stay away. The perfect spell to hide the fact that this place is the sanctum of the best mage this side of Tokyo,” she said with a flutter of her hand, the boy reading no irony into what she said. “Of course, you managed to get through and find me and I didn’t even know you. But hey, that’s why I hired you, didn’t I?”

“Then is the ward in the hospital a dangerous spell or something?”

“Read between the lines, friend. Wards are rather benign as spells go—by themselves anyway. It’s always been used to protect hallowed ground from the prying eyes of the outside world. It originated from Buddhist thought, as far as I know, but now it refers to spells that act as an occultation to the mage, making him or her *extremely* difficult to find. Good ones don’t get

noticed. The best ones just go out-and-out creating a small demarcated space that's removed from all normal perceptions of 'space', essentially a small, temporary—yet functioning—pocket universe. But that's some straight up high-level thaumaturgy, done only by archmages; though as far as I know, there's only one such individual in Japan."

Now that Tōko was talking about the Art, a subject she rarely tackled in the presence of the boy, she took on a pointed countenance that looked even more serious than her usual expression. Being a mage was her other job—her real job, if one could even call it that. She continued:

"Still, while it may not have been that extreme, that ward in the hospital is still very well woven, whatever effects it may have. I almost didn't notice it at first. I knew someone once that could have worked something like it, but it really could have been anyone deft enough in that aspect of the Art. I guess it fits their specialty, but mages who specialize in wards do tend to distance themselves from most outside affairs, so I can't imagine someone like that meddling in this."

*That ward in the hospital wasn't just some cheap spell from an amateur, though, thought Tōko. It was different, pointed inward maybe. Maybe to veil the hospital from any unwanted attention? The mental urging telling those inside to ignore anything abnormal, so someone could operate with free rein?*

Tōko told none of this to the boy. He still needed to be kept out of any unnecessary meddling from things beyond his ken. She mentioned only enough to be polite, and make it clear to him that this was a matter far above him. Tōko took one glance at the wall clock and stood up.

"Well, guess it's about time I showed my face over there," she said, and started to walk towards the door.

"Miss Tōko, please just take care of Shiki for me," the boy says behind her. Without turning to look at him, she gave him a grunt of acknowledgement and waved a hand in goodbye, but a last question from the boy gave her reason to hold her steps for a moment. "Oh, just a trivial question, ma'am, but who was that expert in wards that you knew?"

She dug into her memory for a moment, then looked over her shoulder and answered.

"Oh, just an old friend. A monk. There's really no need to worry about him. The last time we met was on long-past times, in different continents."

It has been six days since Tōko first filled in as a speech therapist for Shiki's case. She had just come back to the office from the hospital, and she was about ready to just sit down and relax until the day ran out. She looked out the window, the setting sun outside baking the walls of her unlit office into a crisp red, forcing her to slacken her orange necktie; a sign of the coming summer heat.

Each evening she returned to the office with an update on Shiki's progress, an act the boy learned to be thankful for.

"She does PT two times a day, and a battery of brain examinations after that, and both leave her pretty spent. You don't need to be troubling her further by going there, so have the patience to wait a little longer and you'll be able to see her then."

"Will she be fine with just two physical therapy sessions a day? I mean, she was in a coma for two years after all."

"I've heard that they exercised her joints everyday while she was in a coma. These are trained professionals, friend. Trust them to do their job. Hers is a 'rehabilitation' in more than one sense, as she needs to realign herself with society as well. How she recovers physically is only a question of time." Tōko paused to produce a cigarette, promptly putting it into her mouth and lighting it. Shiki Ryōgi, was, to her, an enigma, a puzzle to relish the formulation of a solution. And every time she talked to Shiki, every time she came back to the office to tell the boy, she found herself pondering the greatest puzzle of all: Shiki's identity.

"Her mind, however...well, that's an entirely different story. She's drifting farther apart from her previous self each day, I suspect."

"It's the amnesia, isn't it?" the boy said hesitantly, but also with conviction, as if he'd been preparing himself for this revelation for the past two years.

"I'm not entirely convinced it is. I don't see anything wrong with her personality. It's just that...well, I don't know how you'll react to this so—"

"Don't worry, ma'am. I think you've inured me to these things by now. Please, spare no detail on my account. What exactly is wrong with her?"

Ironic, then, that sparing details was exactly what she had been doing in the last few days. *But, she thought, perhaps it's best that he know now.* "Her other half that you told me about, the other personality known as **Shiki** she kept inside her, has vanished. She probably can't even be sure herself whether she's *Shiki* or **Shiki**. When she awoke, **Shiki** was already gone. And maybe, that's why her soul now feels empty, like a sinkhole. We mages know better than most the consequences of the soul, and the hollow she feels now is a hell of a burden, inexpressible but keenly felt."

"But, why did **Shiki** disappear?" he inquired calmly. *All told, he's taking this quite well*, thought Tōko. *Maybe he really has steeled himself for it.*

"I'm only speculating here, but if you'll entertain it: Two years ago in that accident, the girl you know as *Shiki Ryōgi* died. But **Shiki** took her place and died in her stead. 'Reborn', such as it was, in her mind was a wholly new individual, molded by her memories and experience but unable to truly feel them. She still probably spends her nights there in her dilemma, unable to grasp the sensation that she is someone that is more than the sum of her parts."

"If she's a different individual like you said, does that mean she can't remember anything that happened before?"

"No, no, she remembers just fine, with the exception of the memories that **Shiki** himself made. She suffered what might be called a 'death of the mind'. Think of it as her taking a little trip and gaining new experiences. She's still the Shiki you know, but changed somehow by the journey of her soul. I suspect that's why her growth stopped when she slipped into the coma, as she entered a liminal state of being alive and dead, due to the dual existences of *Shiki* and **Shiki**: a paradox that reality couldn't resolve. Her memories will be a source of continued anxiety, I assure you, as she will be unable to remember many of what made her dual existence unique, and what she does remember she can't process as her own. Her personality is one of synthesis, of the past and the present mixed together."

*I make it sound like it happened involuntarily*, Tōko thought, *but it probably wasn't; to compensate for the one she lost, as a way to retain her identity as a Ryōgi, she changes herself. If that's true, then she's a fool. She needs companionship, not mimesis, to fill the hollow that Shiki left behind, even if she doesn't know it yet.*

Tōko let this remain unsaid, and continued. "But even if we hypothesize that she's a different person, the truth is that she's still *Shiki Ryōgi*, even if she can't feel the same way. Time will pass, and with time, her soul's wounds will heal, and she'll eventually recognize that fact. A rose by any other name and all that jazz. See, a rose doesn't change just because you put it on different soil or water it another way. So don't start slashing your wrists in the bathroom because of it." She added in a whisper, "In the end, a hole has to be filled with something. For her, the memories won't do. She needs to make new memories, new experiences; a new hallow for her soul that she herself can create." Tōko looked squarely at the boy, ensuring there was no mistaking who she was referring to. "And it's your job to get her there. You just go do your thing, make contact and conversation. It's the thing she needs the most after she gets out of the hospital, which

should be soon."

She chuck the cigarette she had been smoking violently out the window, and then raised her arms to stretch her back, the bones producing a satisfying cracking sound.

"I *really* shouldn't have bought a brand of smokes I don't know. That was a horrible smoke right there," she said to no one in particular. The boy couldn't figure out if the long sigh she made afterwards was caused by her hatred of the cigarette or of the difficulty of her job, and decided that it was perhaps best not to ask.

## 14

As my usual morning examination comes to its usual boring close, I glance at the desk calendar beside my bed and realize it's the 20th of June. That makes the duration of my stay here a mere seven days, counting tomorrow when I get out of the hospital. With the gradual recovery of my body, they saw fit to finally cut me loose. And that includes the bandages on my eyes, which will come off early tomorrow morning.

It's amazing how little of importance you can gain, and how much you can lose in as short as a week's time. Akitaka and my parents probably haven't changed a bit, but they feel like strangers. But it's me that's changed, and with it, everything. I can only lie here and watch as it happens. I let my hand brush lightly over the bandages covering my eyes. For all that I lost, *this is the only thing I gained.*

Death: Maybe it's a time and a place. But it's also a concept, formless and shapeless. I lived through it, and now I can literally see it. When I opened my eyes for the first time in two years, the first thing I took notice of wasn't the nurse who rushed to my side in astonishment. It was a line, running across her throat. It only took a moment for me to see the rest: a line in every person, in every wall, even in the air itself, all of them across everything I could see. They were never still, always flowing and slithering in accursed serenity. Then I realized that these weren't just lines. They were cracks and fissures to that oblivion of nothingness I had been in. I was filled with an irrational fear then, a fear of the possibility of that outer darkness pouring into the world I had just returned to. The nurse talked to me, but I couldn't hear the words, only seeing the lines, and the things they were attached to crumbling and dying, breaking apart piece by piece.

It was that vision that provided the impetus for me to try destroying my eyes. My arms moved, half through my own volition, half through instinctual fear, and every muscle hurt like hell. I was still weak, and because of that the doctor was able to stop me from crushing my own eyes. Jury's still out on whether that was a good thing or not. They never seriously asked me why I did it, chalking it up to the fact that my mind was still recovering, and all sorts of involuntary impulses could happen then.

But now my eyes are almost good again, a fact that I couldn't deny any longer. I'd do anything not to see a world like that a second time. Neither the world I'm in now, or the world of " " in my sleep, a place more disgusting and repulsive than any place I'd ever seen. I still can't bear the thought of ever returning there, though I've since consigned it to a bad dream.

Yet these eyes tied to that oblivion are proof enough of how real it was.

I point my fingertips at my eyes. They're only inches away from each other now. All that's left for me to do now is make a fast, clean stab, like I always did in sword practice—

"Hold that thought, friend. Never been told to look before you leap? Whoops, poor choice of words." From the door comes a woman's voice. I turn my head towards it. I didn't have time to remember who she is exactly but whoever she is, I can hear her voice coming closer. I don't seem to hear any accompanying footfalls, however. The person stops right beside my bed.

"Arcane Eyes of Death Perception, huh? Destroying that'd be a huge waste, Shiki. In the first place, even if you destroy it, reality will still make you see what you were meant to see. Curses come home to roost too."

"Who the hell are you?" I ask. I hear the sound of her trying to stifle laughter at my angered inquiry, and a rough click, like a lighter spitting out flame.

"A mage. One you'd do well to listen to. Those Eyes are a tool, and like any tool, you need someone to teach you how to use it." As she speaks, I slowly recognize her voice. The tone is altered somewhat, but it is definitely that speech therapist, here for our daily sessions.

"How to use—"

"Damn right. Better than not knowing anything and fucking everything up right? You have eyes capable of manifesting *death*, Arcane power the likes of which the Celtic god Balor held."

What. The. Hell. I have *absolutely no idea* what this woman is saying.

"Arcane Eyes usually only become permanent through a ritual performed on the eyes, but you, you've had them ever since, didn't you? Your little brush with death was just the kind of thing that would have awakened it. From what I hear from reliable sources, it *was always* your nature."

I know what she's saying, and my memories say the same thing. *Shiki* was always one to look past appearances, and always read a person's character, though she never truly intended to do so. I couldn't possibly begin to speculate as to how she could have known about that, but she continues to talk like she knows every bit about me.

"That was the way *Shiki* rolled, and I suggest you start doing it more often too. Understand that everything has a flaw, a fundamental lie. Then, understand that everything is driven to entropy, to be pulled into chaos and break down. You've been brushing that boundary of death for so long that you've been able to comprehend it, your eyes allowing you to observe these flaws like a microscope would, seeing lines no one else can see. What

you're seeing is a thing's death, its end, and you can touch and mold it with your will. Practically speaking, there's not much difference between you and old Balor now, is there? If you really feel like putting extra finger-shaped holes in your Eyes, then you can sell them to me instead, and I'll happily extract them from you for study."

"Well, you said I'll still see them even if I do, so I don't see why I should hand them ove—"

"Then you do listen to people after all. Then hear this: the mundane life? Ain't gonna happen. And quit your bitching already. End of the line for your dream. Wake up! Open your eyes to my world, the secret world. You were meant to be here. The happiness of the everyday isn't for you."

Her declaration carries a confidence that rides with finality, and it's a sudden and unexpected conclusion that my mind still refuses to accept.

"But...I don't even have the will to live anymore." I manage to utter. A weak reply, but it's all I can bring to fore.

"Oh, let me guess, because your soul is hollow?" she says in a mocking tone. "And yet you don't want to die. You know why? Because you've seen that supernal realm that no third-rate Kabbalist can even begin to conceive of, you ungrateful little brat. Look, I'll break down your existential crisis for you. You were inseparable once, but now that's no longer true. **Shiki's** gone. Big whoop. You're a different person now. You mutter that you don't have the will to live while you entertain the thought of not dying. You say you have no reason to be alive, yet you're scared of death. You're a regular Neville Chamberlain aren't you, sitting on that boundary. Is it still a wonder why your soul is so hollow?"

"How dare you even talk about me like you know me! I don't—" When I finally find the strength to protest, I am cut off again, not by her, but by me...seeing her silhouette through the bandages...as well as the lines she spoke of. Death itself twines around my fingers.

"Guessing you saw the lines again, judging from your reaction. You let your guard down too easily, is why. The stray wraiths in this hospital are happy to have you. You don't get your shit together soon, they'll have a comfortable new home in your body." She must be talking about the white haze. But I haven't seen it around lately. "Oh, they're going to get friendly with you. They're ghosts, you know, parts of the soul fettered to this side, something keeping them from passing on. They aren't sentient, least not like us, but they're instinctual things driven to return to corporeality. This hospital has a lot of them. Practitioners of the spiritual Arts usually protect themselves from being possessed when dealing with ghosts, but to someone with as hollow insides such as yours, it's as easy as stealing a car."

She says it with such contempt that she almost seems to be enjoying the entire affair. If all of that was true, why did it not possess me in the past? I'd never offered any resistance, after all.

"You're pathetic, and make a mockery of the rune ward I put extra effort into casting here to protect you. I guess we're not seeing eye to eye here. All right, you can go do...whatever it is you do from now on for all I care." After she spits out those words, I hear her stand up and make for the door, but before she closes it to leave, she leaves me one last question. "But are you really going to waste what **Shiki** sacrificed himself for, *Shiki Ryōgi*?"

As it has become with the questions she liked to bring up about my past, I could not produce an answer, and my evasion only makes me feel like there was something I missed, something I still couldn't find the reason for.

Night has fallen and darkness has crept into my room. This evening, no footsteps can be heard in the corridor outside, and the silence is kept as dutifully as in a deep mountain. In my head, I keep replaying my conversation with the therapist, specifically her parting words.

*Why did you take Shiki's place, Shiki?* The question echoes in my head, but **Shiki** isn't there to answer. *Why did you disappear? What could you have possibly gained in return? You always liked to dream, always liked to sleep, and yet, on that rain-soaked night, you threw that away and died. You're the me I can never meet, who I never could meet.*

I slowly fall into sleep, racking my mind for a memory, any single scene that could explain why he did what he did. As always, no luck.

The door to my room makes a low creak: someone is opening it. Slow, heavy-set footsteps draw closer. The nurse maybe? No, it's already past midnight. A visitor? But who could possibly come at this late an—

A hand wraps itself lovingly around my neck, cold to the touch. In an instant, strength enters it, squeezing, choking, and my neck begins to be crushed, little by little.

With a moment's pressure, Shiki breathes a single moment's pained gasp. She can feel the air in her throat slowly being cut off as the fingers tighten their caress. Shiki can only wryly observe.

*At the rate this guy is going, my neck's gonna be crushed before I have the air wrung out of me.*

Though unable to see, Shiki attempts to offer her attacker a solid look directly to the face, so close that she can smell the scent of...it. Whatever this thing is, it isn't something that is still alive, judging by the smell. Shiki can feel it now, the corpse looming above her, its grip not slackening for even a second. She grasps both arms, attempting to ward them off, but to no avail—the difference in strength was clear.

*But wait, thinks Shiki, isn't this what I'd wanted all along?*

She stops resisting, and halts her breathing. If I'm going to choose to die, might as well make it as fast as humanly possible. *After all, existing without really "living" is the worst thing you can do to anyone. It's only right for me to disappear.*

Her strength ebbs as she surrenders herself. Though only a few seconds have passed, to Shiki, time seems to be stretching itself out painfully. Cold, wooden hands dig into her skin. The flesh tears, and warm blood seeps forth as proof of life.

*I'm going to die, just like Shiki.*

*And I'm just going to throw that life away, like trash.*

The thought makes Shiki pause.

*Did Shiki really want to die? I never thought about that. Of course he never wanted to die! But—he had to. To protect something. And he wouldn't have wanted me to die too. After all, death is such a lonely, fruitless thing; dark, ominous, and more worthy of fear than anything else.*

"No!" Shiki manages to cough. In a moment, she resumes her resistance, grabbing hold of both arms as before, and puts a foot on her attacker's belly. "Anything but to fall into that place again!"

And with all the strength she could manage on that one leg, she kicks the corpse upwards and away. The blood and skin on Shiki's throat make a wet sound as the hands that held her slip away. Immediately, she stands up and gets herself away from the bed as fast as her feet could carry her, but the corpse is close behind. Its hands struggle in the unlit room, trying to find solid purchase on Shiki's body as he tries to grapple her again.

From what Shiki can tell, the corpse's body is that of an adult man, two

heads higher than her. She fumbles as best as her blindness can allow, but she is hard pressed to resist, her hands being as busy trying to feel herself around the room as warding off the corpse's attacks. She retreats, and retreats once more, until she leads herself back-first into a wall.

The light bump on her back reassures her: it is a hard rap on the glass window. The corpse approaches, and Shiki hears the sound of its arms cutting through the air, which Shiki manages to intercept with her own, stopping them at least for a while. With the window at her back and the corpse in place, all was according to her hastily thought up plan. There is one last consideration that gives her a moment's hesitation—what floor is this on?

"Don't hesitate!" she tells herself, and releases the arms of the corpse as hard as she could manage. Immediately, they gun for her throat again, but Shiki is faster. Using her now free hands, she opens the window. With the force of the corpse's grapple and approach, they both fall out of the window, entangled with each other.

In an instant, me and the corpse are out of the window and in open air. In the next instant, I grab it by the shoulder and force it downwards, reversing our positions. With him below me to soften my fall, we descend together. A second or two later, it hits the ground, and I feel the force of the impact sharply but without lasting pain. I jump away from it, the hands and feet that support my landing scattering some dirt in the hospital's yard.

Judging from the sound of foliage just before the fall, the corpse had fallen on some sort of flower bed a meter or so away.

*That was an amazing landing, if I do say so myself. So amazing in fact, that my body is frozen in place, likely still catching up at having just fallen three floors. The smell on the wind is that of fresh leaves and trees in the courtyard. In contrast to the excitement of the last few seconds, the night is deathly silent. Unmoving, I feel only the throbbing pain in my throat. It tells me that I'm still alive.*

As for the corpse...well, whatever it is, it isn't done yet. If I don't want to die, then I know what I need to do.

Kill. Before it kills me.

With that thought, the cavernous emptiness that had until moments ago gripped my heart fades away. All my doubts, all my worries, disappear all at once.

"That's all?" I whisper. It's only then that I awaken, for real this time.

How stupid and foolish I was, to brood as I did, when all along the answer

was so fine and simple.

"Catty in more than one sense, aren't we?" says a voice from behind Shiki, a voice she recognizes as the therapist's. Shiki does not turn to meet her, still shocked from the fall.

"You again? Kind of late for therapy, don't you think?" Shiki asks.

"I'll have you know I was standing guard," answered the self-styled mage nonchalantly. "It all had to come to a head tonight, before you got out, one way or the other. These ghosts wanted your body but couldn't get it, so they possess a dead body to take care of that problem."

"Please don't tell me this is all because of that weird stone you left in the room."

"Oh ho, so she remembers. No, it's not the rune's fault, but I will admit this is a mistake I did not foresee. I erected a ward that should have kept ghosts out, but then they get themselves a corporeal body to circumvent that. They usually aren't that smart, neither with the body, or their dogged determination to have you specifically. I smell strings behind this." The mage chuckles, as if this was all some grand game she was playing with another of her kind, and she had just made a small tactical mistake.

"Well, now's your chance to rectify that. Why not show me some of the magic up your sleeve, mage?"

"Don't mind if I do." With that, the mage snaps a finger. In the air, her hand moves as if to conduct a *mudra*, manipulating the cigarette she holds to describe a symbol made out of straight lines in the air, which finds itself suddenly projected onto the still-staggered corpse. It is rune script, her conduit to arcane power, and through it she sets fire to the rotting body, putting flame to it from afar. "The Ansuz I have is too weak for this," she grumbles, seemingly disappointed. The reason soon becomes clear.

The flames embrace the corpse, but it only starts to stand up, unmindful of its current state. The bones on its leg are clearly broken, and yet once it stands it continues to advance, shuffling and dragging itself towards Shiki. It is not long before the flames extinguish themselves, the power animating it expiring.

"Are you telling me he's still standing? Are you a real mage or are we in the part where you try selling me bridges?"

"I think I preferred you more docile. This is difficult, and definitely not my area of expertise. If it was a regular human, bam, end of story. But since it's a corpse, it doesn't really mind if it loses an arm or a head. You'd need an incinerator to stop him, or maybe a particularly devout monk could—"

"Let's make this quick, shall we? Long story short, you can't do it." The

mage shoots Shiki an annoyed glance at what she just said, her pride forced to submit to her inability.

"Don't think your newfound talents are going to save you from that thing for long, too. It's already dead. While you can kill people, you're a long way away from unmaking the death-touched. We'll fall back for now." The mage retreats a step. Shiki, however, remains unmoving, though not through any injury from the fall. She is only smiling, as if this ridicule in itself was enough to stop the approaching enemy.

"Dead or whatever you wanna call it, that body is moving, still 'living', right? Then—" Shiki finally lifts herself up, standing now with back bent in the manner of some ancient predator. She puts a finger to her neck, feels the texture of her torn skin, and of the life blood flowing out of it, the traces of strangulation still left. *And yet, here I stand, alive.* The sensation of it is almost orgasmic. "—whatever it is, I'll kill it," she finishes.

The bandages that blinded Shiki come loose and drift away on the wind, at last revealing in the midst of the black night her spellbound Eyes. In an instant, she puts energy into her legs, breaking into a run, every kick of her legs scattering the soil beneath her feet.

She sees everything now. She sees the corpse and how it raises a hand to strike her as she approaches. Shiki is only barely able to duck under it. Most especially now, she sees the lines, no longer as threatening as before, but inviting, throbbing and pulsating to an invisible rhythm. She sees the lines on the corpse, and with one hand traces one of their number, stretching from right shoulder to left hip. Though her hand seems to slip easily into the line, the attack costs her a broken finger, a minor inconvenience compared to the injury dealt to Shiki's enemy, who is now cut in half.

Like a puppet being cut from its strings, the thing collapses in a heap, its one arm the only part of it still able to move, grasping Shiki's leg like a writhing insect. Without mercy, Shiki quickly stomps on it with her foot.

"What a useless piece of death you are," she spits out, more indignant than she has ever been. "Begone from my sight!" She laughs a silent laugh and thinks, *I'm alive! All that worry and trouble, gone like bad lies, and the only truth is that I live.*

"Shiki!" calls out the mage from the distance. She throws a thin, silvery object at the ground near Shiki, and before it lands it catches a glint of the moonlight. A knife, plain and unadorned. She retrieves it from the ground and sets about its first task. She looks down at the persistent half-body clinging to her for a moment before bringing the knife down on its throat. The corpse stops moving almost instantly, but the mage calls out again.

"You idiot! Stab it right in the heart!" But it is already too late. Faster

than her rebuke comes the white haze that Shiki once knew, floating back into ethereal existence the moment Shiki brought down the knife. At once, it beats a hasty retreat...not away, but into Shiki's body. She falls to her knees as if in a trance. In the moment that Shiki lost herself to the ecstasy of murder, it is then that they make their move to possess her, when the sense of self is weakened.

The mage draws closer to Shiki. "She didn't finish it, the damned fool." It seems, however, that Shiki still maintains some tenuous control, as she holds out an outstretched arm towards the mage. *Don't come closer*, it seems to say, and the mage finds herself complying. Now with both hands, Shiki grasps the knife, fingers clinging to it like the symbol of life itself, and positions it point-downwards above her own chest.

Determination returns to her hollow eyes. Her lips are still as she grits her teeth and brings the knife slowly downwards until the tip touches lightly upon the skin of her breast. She tells herself in her mind that neither her body nor the hallow of her soul have not yet been plundered by any foolish ghost.

"Now there's nowhere for you to run," she speaks to no one but herself. Shiki directs the spellbound sight of her Arcane Eyes inward to see the death of the spectral thing that plagued her, willing and weaving her magic to kill it and only it. Believing only that she won't be injured from what she was about to do, she gathers her strength.

"I'll kill the weak part of me. And you will never have Shiki Ryōgi ever again."

She presses the knife downwards, the blade sliding smoothly through flesh.

The few seconds that pass before she moves again carry the air of a ritual, and when she does move, she withdraws the knife from her chest. No blood runs from her breast, nor are there any traces of it on the blade. But she feels the phantom pain of that knife all the same. She takes a swing at the air, violently, as if to remove the invisible taint of the spirits on the blade, and then speaks to the mage.

"I remember what you said. You said that you'd teach me how to use these Eyes." Her voice, once so quivering and unsure, now settles into a confidence. The mage, seemingly satisfied, nods her assent.

"Make no mistake, friend. This is a transaction. You'll learn to focus your talent, but in return you'll help me with my work. I recently lost my familiar, so I need another pair of helping hands."

"Right," Shiki says without even turning to look at her benefactor. "Does that mean I get to kill people?" The question makes even the mage shiver

in spite of herself, but she tries to remove her reservation in her answer.

“Obviously.”

“Then you have me. Do whatever you want with me. After all, it’s not as if I have any direction in my life.” And with that, she falls unconscious, tired from the fighting, and from the pain on her chest, a look of melancholy on her face just before she collapsed.

The mage lifts her up in her arms, staring for a long time at Shiki’s sleeping face. In contrast to her countenance only moments ago, her face is now tranquil, enough to create the illusion that no life ever flowed through those cheeks. Before long, the mage offers her own words, not caring whether Shiki hears her or not.

“No direction, huh? Unfortunately, you’re wrong again.” She begins to detest the peace on Shiki’s face. “Because a hollowed soul means you can put as much as you can back into it. Where else can you find better prospects, you lucky bastard?”

She clicks her tongue in annoyance, for these are words that she thought she’d forgotten how to say.

# Chapter 10

Slowly, slowly, I slip into dream. But even in dream the question remains: The man known as **Shiki** no longer exists, but what did he gain, and what did he hope to protect, by disappearing as he did? In dream, *Shiki* Ryōgi's memories provide the answer like a parting gift.

He died to protect a shared dream, a dream of finally finding his—our—own slice of peace. And he thought we had found it. He believed in him, in that boy.

He died for me, and for that boy, and he left me with this deep, abiding, loneliness.

Warm sunshine forces open my eyelids, and I remember now that my Eyes are no longer covered, no longer blind. It feels like I'm lying down on the bed. That mage must have put me back in my room when I fell unconscious last night, set things back to right.

Completely still, I absorb as much of the morning atmosphere as I can manage, taking in the warm yet fleeting sunlight, as if to let it wash out the darkness that possessed me last night. I feel the languor of the morning, feel it melding the dreams of my twin existence to create one fleeting life. I want so much to cry for **Shiki**, but I've decided to cry only once from now on. He represents something I'll never be able to return to, and this isn't the time and place for tears, and so my eyes are dry.

Besides, he would have wanted to disappear without anyone crying anyway.

"Morning, Shiki."

I hear a voice coming from beside my bed, and when I turn my head to look toward it, there sits a familiar friend, his appearance unchanged even in the face of two years. The black, unadorned hair he keeps, and the similarly black-rimmed glasses: both are exactly as they were, as if he stepped out of past and into present.

"Do you...still know who I am?" he asks with marked hesitation. He didn't need to.

Yeah, I know. You're the one that waited, the only one that cared enough to watch over me.

"Mikiya Kokutō, right?" I respond, almost in a whisper. "Last name still

sounds like some French poet to my ears.” He smiles as broadly as the day we met the second time in school. I wonder, though, if he still remembers the promise we made.

“Nice day out today. Perfect weather for getting out of the hospital, don’t you think?” Faintly, I can see the tears behind his eyes that he is so desperately trying to hold back and sound as natural as he can. It’s a touching sentiment. He chose to smile rather than to cry.

Just like Shiki chose to recognize solitude instead of becoming solitary. Though I still don’t know which of the two I should side for.

“Guess there are still things I didn’t lose,” I mutter as I look at him contentedly, the sunlight streaming in through the window behind him half-obscuring his smile. I know that such gestures aren’t enough to heal my empty heart, but still...

It was still the same smile I remember, unchanged neither by time or flawed memory.

# BOUNDARY GRECIA

In a room that had seen no alteration in years, in days locked in stasis, a girl shivered while she lay on top of her bed. The door had not admitted a visitor in quite some time, but today it opened for one such a man. Steps echoed in the room, there one moment, and gone the next, choosing when and if they made a sound. It was him, no doubt about it.

He stood high, with a cruel body and constantly clouded eyes that bore the weight of an eternity's reckoning. Those grim eyes only looked at her, but still she felt the dread that passes through a prisoner when she sees her warden. The room felt emptier with him in it, and even the girl, who longed for death, had to acknowledge the deathly fear that shook her.

"You are Kirie Fujō, are you not?" His voice was ice, flowing and crashing. Though blind, Kirie Fujō attempted to look towards her visitor and ask back.

"Are you that friend of my father's?" The man did not speak, but Kirie knew the answer all the same. This was the man who had paid for her stay here in the hospital, when Kirie's family had all died. "What brings you here? You know I can't do anything for you." She tried to hold back her trembling as she spoke.

The man remained motionless, but spoke. "I have come to grant your wish. Do you desire another body, free of this prison?" Kirie heard some harmony of magic in his impossible statement, and she thought that even that absurdity could be made possible.

After a beat of silence, the girl nods her assent, throat trembling, and the man lowers his head and raises his right hand in answer. And it was here he granted her a dream and a waking nightmare. But before this moment, she put to him a question.

"What—who are you?"

He answered—

She left the abandoned underground bar behind her and started on her way. Each step was heavy, and each ragged breath brought her closer to collapse. As she progressed, she had to lean on street light posts and the walls of buildings to stop herself from falling over.

Earlier, in the bar, she had been struck in the back with a bat by one among the five that violated her with regularity. She felt no pain. Only a dull heaviness from the thought of being struck. She held a pained expression, not out of anguish but by the expectation of anguish that she thought should be present. She had planned to endure the regular humiliation and go home to her dormitory in silence. But tonight, with her mind and body sluggish and unresponsive, the way home seemed to stretch on interminably.

She passes the display window of a shop in the commercial end of town and sees how pale she has become in her reflection. Without a sense of pain, she only knows that she's been hit in the back, and that the injury is bad. She has no idea to what extent. She walks on, not knowing her backbone has already endured a crack.

The hospital is out of the question. Even if she went to the doctor that her parents didn't know, he'd still ask questions, and that would blow the whole thing open. She was never good at lies. Besides, the distance to his clinic was much too far.

"What should I do?" Desperation evident in her whisper. Too tired to go further, she starts to fall towards the sidewalk—

—until a man's arm stopped her fall.

Astonished, she looked upwards, seeing a man with hard set eyes. He asked her:

"You are Fujino Asagami, are you not?" His was a voice that brooked no refusal. It was the first time that the girl, Fujino Asagami, felt such a fear as to freeze her in place. "Your spine must be healed, elsewise you cannot move freely." His words spoke of improbabilities, and yet brought home with clarity the reality of Fujino's situation.

She wants it. She wants to go back to her dormitory, the only place where she had ever found peace. Her eyes are clouded with meek desperation, and they meet the man's own. He wore a long coat despite the summer heat, and its features were a solid black. His anachronistic cloak and rigid gaze somehow brought to Fujino's mind the image of a monk.

"Do you wish me to heal you?" he finally asks, but he phrases it more like

a demand than an inquiry. Fujino didn't even notice herself nod in assent.  
"Then let it be so. Your body's defect I do now scatter."

And it was here that his face was ever still as his right hand touched Fujino's back lightly. But before this moment, she put to him a question.

"Who are you?"

He answered—

But before this moment, he put to him a question.

"Who...who the hell are you, man?"

The man in the black cloak remained motionless as he answered. His voice seemed then to be powered by some demiurgic force, and through him that force spoke, resounding through the alleyway with the whispering of ages.

"A mage. My name is Sōren Alaya."



5  
矛盾螺旋上

Part V: Paradox Spiral

Paradox Paradigm.



Back when I was a kid, I used to hold on to this little piece of metal all the time. It was an ugly little thing, with these dull, jagged teeth that started to dig into your skin if you held it tight enough. A lot of times, it felt like holding all the loneliness of a cold December day. Still, I loved that little thing.

I loved the way it made a click every time you turned it around, a chime for each day's beginning and another for its end. The sound made me so proud every time I heard it, but it was also twinned with something strangely melancholic.

But in time, I soon found those spiraling days coming to a close. The only thing that remained is the silver glint of the metal, and the chill of its surface. There was no joy when I held it now, only blood that sometimes oozes when I grip it too tight. There wasn't any sadness either. Maybe there never had been. It's just a simple scrap of metal, nothing more. And when I grew older still, even the glint of it—which once seemed so magical—disappeared.

It was then that it finally hit me: growing up is throwing away fantasy for the cunning of survival. And for realizing that, I praised myself for my own cleverness.

# Prologue

This is the year when autumn went as fast as it came.

Having just entered the departing days of November, and with winter already well underway, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department found another strange tale adrift on its shores. To be fair, ghost stories and the like were never out of season for the Crime Investigation Section, a trait it lovingly shares with hospitals all over the city. It's practically a year-round campfire, huddling together in a dark corner of the human experiment to share what new stories the city decided to churn out the murder mill.

Which is probably why when Detective Akimi, who is as natural a police as they come, actually gets interested in a case of his own accord, it is a case of some deserved curiosity. Akimi built his career on stone whodunits, a man who loved the mystery. Combine this with him hearing gossip about a very peculiar report, and you have him phoning the relevant stations for the very same report in no time at all.

So far however, reading the plainly written report held little for him. It told a story of a bizarrely failed burglary that took place in some residential high-rise a small ways away from downtown in early October. The perp was a joe with a previous record, an all too common caper: burgle the apartments of people who'd just left it unlocked. Simple, old, but still effective. The day of the incident, he stole into just such an apartment after staking the place out and waiting for someone to leave, which was probably the extent of his planning.

What came after was what made this report interesting. Apparently, the same guy came running to the nearest police station yelling for help. The on-duty officers eventually got a story out of his hysteria: that he saw the dead bodies of the family that lived in the apartment he broke into. An officer escorted him back to the apartment immediately, only to find that the family he spoke of was indeed there. On the other hand, they weren't dead. Instead, they were in quite good health and in fact enjoying a family dinner. This understandably disturbed the burglar, though the officer really cared only about the fact that the man had exposed himself to breaking and entering, and thus, took him into custody.

Leaning back on his squeaky pipe chair, Detective Akimi offers an incredulous "What the fuck?" at the air, directed at no one. The suspect tested negative for alcohol or drugs, and didn't suffer from any glaring mental health problems. Certainly a strange and curious report, but otherwise,

there didn't seem to be a case here, if it was worthy of even being called one. Hardly a case to stand beside the current investigation that's got half the section in a rustle: four missing one after another, with no clue as to their whereabouts, and four families that they needed to shut up while they worked the case from an angle that benefitted from their silence. Much like the serial killings three years ago, it's resulted in many a sleepless night for him, and he certainly didn't need this case to add more.

Still, he could feel the hairs on his back rise when he read the report, a feeling that he'd learned to trust as the instinct that something was there, waiting to be discovered; maybe even a report that could be turned into a case with legs to spit shine the clearance rate.

"Worth a call, at least," Akimi says as he picks up the receiver on his desk phone and puts it to his ear. He dials the number of the station where the report came from. Before long, an on-duty officer answers and Akimi starts to inquire for details on the report. Did they check with the other tenants for anything out of place? Did they find any inconsistency with the suspect's description of the family? But it becomes fruitless as the answers fit his expectations, that they had indeed asked the neighbors, and no there was nothing out of place, and that the description of the perp was spot-on except with regards to the family's state of being. With quick thanks, Akimi puts the receiver back.

At that instant, a voice calls him from behind. "What are you on the phone for, Daisuke? You need to get rolling. The second guy's body's just been found, and you're the primary on the case."

"Fuck it, another one? Don't tell me it's another partially eaten body."

Akimi's friend only responds with a curt nod, which is his cue to drop his curiosity and get out of here. No one's going to care about the report, but it was all tumbleweeds when he read it anyway. And nothing takes priority over this new serial murder case. With that, the report goes back into file in a cabinet somewhere to be forgotten, even by Detective Akimi, the CIS's lover of mysteries.

# Paradox Spiral - I

In the first few days of October, the streets already blow over with the bitter cold.

Winds with fingers of ice grant gentle caresses to the lamp posts and dumpsters. Usually, the city still looked alive at this hour, at 10 o' clock in the evening. But tonight is different. Tonight, scattered pools of light in the streets, from display stores to the street lamps, only serve to accentuate the little shadows and silhouettes playing across them. Winter is coming early this year, and considering the temperature, it wouldn't be at all out of place to discover snow falling tonight. The silhouettes of people exiting the train station, jackets worn and collars fluttering in the wind, lack all the life they normally have. Like automatons, they walk at brisk paces to their homes, not stopping for a look at a display window or a warm cup of coffee. They hurry because they all want the warmth and familiarity of their homes.

From the wave of people, to the heat that refuses to gather, and even the shops whose lights seem just a little bit dimmer; the boy witnesses all of it. He sits beside a vending machine situated in a little nook beside the avenue, idly watching the people exiting the train station. Almost as if to hide himself, he sits hugging his legs to his chest, and he cuts a pitifully thin figure that makes it hard to determine his gender from afar. His hair, arranged like a bundle of unkempt straw, is dyed red. He looks to be around the age of sixteen or seventeen. His eyes are narrowed, yet they don't seem to be particularly interested in anything. He shivers under strange clothes: dirty jeans and a blue jacket one or two sizes too big for him, with nothing else to cover his top. It isn't surprising to see him with teeth chattering.

He sits there for a long time, and just when the number of people exiting the station begins to thin noticeably, he finds himself surrounded by a number of other people.

"Yo, Tomoe," says one of them, not even attempting to hide the scorn in it. The red-haired boy doesn't respond.

"Ah c'mon, Enjō, don't be a dick and ignore us," he persists. Lifting the boy by his jacket, he forces the boy from the ground. The boy saw all of them now, five people surrounding him, stand at almost the same height as he does, and it is easy to tell their ages are not so far apart. "What, just 'cuz you stopped going to school, we strangers now?" The same person continues. "Oh, now I get it. Our little Tomoe is a fucking grown up now, so

he don't talk to kids like us anymore, eh?"

The rest of his companions all snicker in response. But when the noise dies down, Tomoe continues to ignore them. Frustrated, the boy holding Tomoe by the jacket lets it go with a grunt, only to bring his hand back up in a fist, punching Tomoe in the face. He collapses back to the ground, and he hears a distinct clinking sound of something metallic falling out of his pocket.

"Hey, don't even think about sleepin', man." More laughter. Hearing that clinking sound seems to jolt Tomoe Enjō from whatever state of shock he had been suffering up to now. He whispers his own name, like some sort of resuscitative ritual, remembering who he was, why he was here. With senses regained, he looks at the boys surrounding him, finally remembering them as his classmates, former "friends." Normal students who played at being adult.

*Preying on weak people like me*, Tomoe thinks.

"Aikawa, right?" says Tomoe. "Hell you doing here at this hour?"

"Right back at you, man. We all been worried you be suckin' dick behind the restaurants just to get by. I mean, seeing as you're such a girl. Am I right?" He gestures and looks over his shoulder toward his compatriots.

Because of his overly thin build, Tomoe has been called a girl in school for as long as he can remember. He never paid any heed to it, and that is largely how he reacts now. However, he does pick up the empty aluminum can he had been drinking from some minutes ago.

"Hey, Aikawa," Tomoe calls. Aikawa returns his attention to him.

"Wha—"

As soon as Tomoe sees that pimple-ridden face turn towards him, mouth half open to speak, he thrusts the can violently into it, twisting the can as deeply as he can inside Aikawa's mouth. He quickly follows it up by slapping the can as hard as he can muster. Now it is Aikawa's turn to collapse. Tomoe's slap partially crushed the can, causing the surface to bend sharply in places, and when Aikawa coughs it up on the ground, both the can and his mouth are dripping with blood.

Aikawa's companions are dumbstruck. They thought they would just mess with their former classmate, maybe even take some of his money. It never occurred to them that it would turn to violence.

"Still shit for brains, I see," Tomoe remarks wryly. Then he kicks him sharply and repeatedly in the head, almost like he wants to kill him, a stark contrast to his seemingly uninterested demeanor earlier. Aikawa doesn't move an inch, though whether it's because he's unconscious or his neck is broken, Tomoe doesn't know. After a few quick kicks, Tomoe makes a

break for it, before Aikawa or his cronies can come to their senses. Thinking the crowd will just slow him down, Tomoe turns instead towards one of the side alleys where he can make good his escape in the sharp, confusing turns. It's only a second or two after he starts running that the group he left behind start to process what just happened before them. He hears their angry calls as they start after him.

"Asshole thinks he can just do this to us? Let's kill that son of a bitch!" says a voice echoing in the alleyways, whipping his companions into a frenzy. Through the capillaries of the city, they chase Tomoe like live game, baying for blood.

"Kill that son of a bitch."

I let the words bounce around in my head, and I laugh heartily to myself.

I heard the verve in their voice, heard how serious they were, and they would probably follow through on it when they catch up to me. But they're faking it, as much as anyone else who says it jokingly. They don't know what happens to you after you do it for the first time. They don't know what killing someone does to a person. But see, I do.

I killed someone, just before I went to the train station. I remember gripping the knife, and feeling the tenderness each time I stabbed. Just thinking back on it makes me shiver and want to throw up. My teeth start to chatter again, and my mind recoils on the memory with the force of a hurricane. Those guys don't understand how far it removes you, and that's why they can say they'll "kill" as if they're just going for a little walk.

Guess I'll be the one to teach them, then. I focus my mind and allow my laughter to recede into a little smile. I don't consider myself a particularly violent guy. I believe in an eye for an eye, but tonight's the first time I've ever busted someone up who just hit me. Disproportional response. It ain't like me, but I did it. Maybe because I actually liked the feeling of not holding back.

I come to a narrow alley sandwiched between two buildings, far from the main road and any curious eyes or ears. I stop here, right at the corner, thinking it a prime spot for the act. Before long, they catch up, and things happen in snapshots of time. One of them, ahead of the others, rounds the corner of the alley, and I take a fraction of a second to confirm it's who I want it to be before I spring on him. The palm of my left hand shoots up to connect with his jaw. I think fast. In an amateur fistfight, it often comes down to endurance in an exchange of blows. I know I don't have a hair's breadth of a chance winning like that, especially outnumbered, so if I'm

going to do this, I do it to kill them one by one, without hesitation, before I'm surrounded.

The guy I just hit tries to return the favor, but before that happens, I thrust a finger into his left eye. It feels kind of like slightly hard jell-o when I twist my finger around.

His scream is enough to send a chill down anyone's spine. Before he has time to regain their composure, though, I grab the guy's head and, putting my whole body behind it, finish him off by slamming the head into the wall. A dull thud as it makes impact with the concrete, and when I let go of him, his body slides against the wall towards the ground, the back of his head leaving a lazy blood trail on the wall and his left eye a dripping, bloody mess. Still, he's probably not dead from just that. I pull my eyes away from him to meet the other four still coming, and if I'm lucky, they'll be just that little bit hesitant after they heard their friend screaming his guts out.

When the rest of them turn the corner, they are immediately taken aback at the sight of their friend. Just as I thought, they are unprepared. They've probably seen their share of accidentally spilled blood in street fights, but they've never seen a body that looks like it's bleeding its life out on the asphalt. Wasting no time, I attack the nearest guy, slapping him, and then grabbing him by the hair. I lower his head fast, then bring my knee up to his kindly waiting face. A low crunching sound tells me that I may have broken his nose. I give him three more kneeings for good measure, then bring my elbow down at his skull. The impact is a painful shockwave traversing my arm for a brief moment.

Two down. My knee is a dark red, soaked in the second man's blood.

"Enjō, you motherfucker!"

That last one finally pushes the rest of them over the edge. Without any sense of reason or forethought, they jump into the brawl all at the same time. That's when I know I'm done. I can't take on three guys at the same time, and they prove me right.

They lash out punches and kicks, pushing me back against the same wall I slammed their friend against not moments ago until they force me to the ground. I feel the knuckles digging into my cheeks, and I reel from every kick that lands on my stomach. Nevertheless, they're not fighting the same way I did earlier. No ferocity. They're not gonna kill me. They don't want to. And yet, if they keep this up, they *will* eventually kill me. They won't know that they'll break bones, cause internal bleeding, and make it more difficult for me to breathe. The fact that my death will be a slow slide into nothingness instead of a quick and easy one grants me a measure of anguish.

See? Even if they don't mean to, people still end up killing other people.

As the hits continue to land on my body, I wonder: Between people like me who truly seek to kill, and people like them who will just commit an unintentional homicide, who carries it heavier in the end?

My body is already covered in bruises, but the pain is becoming routine, almost welcoming now. I'm sure that bunch are getting really into it in their own way, too. It won't be long before they start to enjoy it, and they won't be able to stop themselves.

"Now don't we look cute with that face, Enjō?" says one of them. He thrusts his foot keenly into my chest, and my violent coughing immediately afterwards leaves the taste of blood in my mouth. I'm down for the count, and I realize I have maybe a precious few seconds before they completely beat the life out of me, the same life that I never valued as anything above expendable. A fist hits my eye, and half my vision goes dark. At that moment, I hear a faint sound. Then a beat of silence. Another beat. They don't seem to be moving.

The noise resounds again like a bell: the singular, clacking tone of wood. With pained eyes I see the three guys, heads already turned towards the sound emanating from the alley's entrance. I train my vision to the same direction even as the swelling in my eyes grow more painful as I move them.

My mind stops.

Silhouetted against the mouth of the alley is a person who clearly doesn't belong here. The clacking sound we'd all heard earlier comes from the person's wooden *geta* footwear; the dark finish, red strap, and oval shape clear even from this distance. A woman's *geta*. The clothing on the figure is peculiar to say the least: a red leather jacket atop a dead plain orange kimono.

The shadow advances, each step like a reverberating wooden bell. The person's movement is a hypnotic sway of clothes and carelessly cut ink-black hair that invite surrender, and I almost forget myself. Wraithlike white skin, and eyes of clear void. Surely not the usual everyday sight in a back-lane filled with scattered bottle shards and discarded syringes.

A woman...a girl. I almost can't tell her gender, but somehow, I know she's a girl.

"Hey," she calls out, continuing to venture deeper into the alley and closer to us. The three who had surrounded me now break off to meet her. It's painfully obvious what they're planning on doing to the girl.

"Ain't nothing for you here, lady." The trio flex their fingers for a new round of violence, the excitement in their gait barely contained. They move to surround the lone girl. Unable to move more than an inch, and with my speech coming out as strained gasps of air, I can do nothing except to

curse them in my mind. I chose this place so as not to involve anyone else, and yet here she is in defiance of all probability. And now, no doubt only because she chose to turn the wrong alley for a shortcut home, she'll be a victim as well.

"I ain't playing, girl!" one of the three shouts. "Don't you got ears to hear what I just said?"

The girl is silent again now, but in a flash, she extends a hand, using it to grab the arm of one of the approaching boys. She pulls. Her posture changes subtly to one that puts her entire weight behind the action, and her purchase on the boy's arm then forces him to the ground in one violent motion. Watching it from where I lie, the entire thing seemed to go frame-by-frame, as if I was turning the handcrank on an old viewing machine.

The remaining two attempt to close in on the girl, and she immediately strikes the closest one in the chest with her palm, causing him to crumple like a ragdoll to the ground, unconscious. It amazes me that she knocks them out of commission with such ease, all in the space of about five or so seconds, while I exerted so much effort to take out an equal number of people. The last one must have realized this fact as well, since as soon as the second man is down he starts to turn on his heels and run screaming. She soon ends that with a swift roundhouse kick delivered straight to the guy's head, with barely the noise of rustling clothes to its credit. Like the previous two, he is rendered unconscious.

"Ouch. Literally hard head on that last one," she grumbles as she fixes the creases on her kimono. I keep my eyes fixed on her, wondering if she's even going to talk to me. It's strange but not altogether uncomfotting that I can still slightly distinguish her form in this isolated place, even in the absence of light. "Hey, mister punching bag," she calls out as she turns to me. I try to speak but it only results in me coughing. She reaches inside a pocket in her leather jacket and pulls a small object out, throwing it on the ground within my reach. "Dropped it back there on the street. S'yours, right?"

I turn my eyes sideways to look at it, and see a single, shining key. It must have fallen out of my pocket when the guys were roughing me up. My key to a house that I've already tried to stop caring about. She must have come here just to give it back to me.

She turns her back on me without a single word and starts to make her way back out of the alley with all the airiness of her previous entrance: the relaxed gait of a casual night stroll, leaving me lying on the ground to fend for myself.

"Wai—," the word comes half-formed out of my mouth, and I reach out

my hand towards her. Though I'm hesitant to call more attention than I needed to from a girl who just took out three guys in the time it took me to take out one, I couldn't stand just being left here like a fake toy, lost among the refuse of the city.

"Wait." The word comes out, though in a weak breath. I try to redouble the strength in my voice and shout. "Just wait, for crying out loud!"

I try to stand, and every bone in my body throbs with pain from the attempt. I end up having to support my half-standing posture with a hand on the wall, itself aching from having to exert pressure. At least my noise-making manages to stop the girl, who now directs her cold gaze in my direction.

"What now?" she says, her voice still as calm as before. "Look, if you dropped anything else, good luck finding it."

"Are you just going to leave these dudes here?" I manage to protest in between bouts of labored breathing. The girl in the kimono takes in the scene around her, casting her eyes downwards almost as if it's her first time looking at it. Her sight lingers on the two persons who I took care of in my haphazard, improvised fashion, then finally looks back at me with upturned eyes and a curious sigh.

"You don't have to worry about them. That one," she says, motioning her head towards the first of the two, "will probably get an eyepatch and be doomed to do pirate impressions for the rest of his life. The other will have trouble breathing with his nose for a while. But no one's dead. I'd be much more worried about what the first guy who wakes up will do to you. And yet, here you are, implying that we should get them some help?"

"I...guess?" I respond.

"Well see, that puts us in a pickle. Who do we call, hmm? The police? An ambulance, maybe?" Her eyes narrow with each sentence that prods me. I wasn't thinking about calling the police. Maybe the hospital. But they'd ask questions. If I mentioned self-defense...maybe the police would be faster, but—

"Five-oh are out of the question."

"And why is that?" she asks, but it feels like she already knows the answer. Her eyes continue to bore into me. There's no use in hiding it anymore. She's got me, and if I tried to hide it, she'll just ask more questions. And so I say it.

"Because...I'm a murderer." As I say it out loud, as much to myself as to her, time seems to stop and all things grow silent. Far from my expectation of her being shocked, however, she only walks toward me. Her eyes scan me up and down.

"Well, you don't look like one." She looks me over, an eyebrow cocked and a hand on chin and lip paused in pensive observation. Overtaken by the moment, and feeling quite shocked by her doubt, I feel compelled to explain.

"It's true! It weren't a few hours ago, I swear. I took a kitchen knife and stabbed her over and over in the stomach until everything was all wet and mushy, then I cut off her head. You can't tell me she ain't dead after that!" I start to snicker in spite of myself. "The five-oh are all probably in my house wondering where the fuck I've gone, all scratching their heads 'cause of another late night job. Just you wait, I'll be all over the morning news tomorrow!"

It took me a while to notice that I was making a sort of strange laugh after I said that, the kind of noise that lies somewhere in that ambiguous space between laughter and sobbing. The kimono-clad girl gives me time to calm myself down before talking again.

"Right," she says, unsurprised. "Well, cool, I guess. You've convinced me. Let's put off contacting anyone unless you want your mornings to have significantly more iron bars than usual. Guess that explains why you're shirtless. I thought that was what all the cool kids run with these days."

Her cold fingers brush over my chest with a light, almost curious touch.

"Hey," I say, but with little force behind it. She was right. I dumped my shirt since it was covered in so much blood I'd get noticed easily. I just grabbed my jacket to compensate as I ran out of the house. "Ain't you even gonna say something about me? I really did kill someone. You think I'm just gonna let you go, knowing what you know? Ain't no difference between killing one person or two."

That seems to grab her attention. She brings her face closer to mine, eyes half-closed in disappointment. "Yes," she sighs. "There is."

"There is what?"

"A difference."

Her presence is almost overpowering, even though I stand a head higher than her and she's the one looking up at me. Her empty eyes never stop staring at me, and I gulp involuntarily. I've never seen anything like them before. The black irises are a tempting well that threatens to drown you endlessly. In my seventeen years, I've thought people can be many things: cruel, deceptive. But never beautiful. So overwhelmingly beautiful that I almost forget myself.

"I'm...a murderer," I declare again. I feel that there is nothing more to say. The girl casts her bewitching glance away from me and lowers her head.

"I know. I'm one of those, too." She doesn't explain further. There is no need to. She turns on her heels, and with the wind ruffling her clothes and the sound of her *geta* on the asphalt she starts to leave. I didn't want her to disappear. Not tonight.

"Wait!" I run to catch up to her, but with my injuries still getting the better of me, I fall to the ground. I stand up again, and look straight at the girl, unwavering. "If we really are the same breed of person, then help me," I yell with such uncharacteristically reckless abandon, casting away reason and shame. The girl's eyes open in surprise.

"Same breed? Well, I certainly know what it feels like to have that empty space in your chest. But what do you expect me to help you with? The crime of your murder, or taking care of your wounds? Either way, I can't do anything for you."

"Sooner or later, someone will spot us here. Maybe you could hide me."

She ponders the suggestion with a scratch of her head and annoyed grumbling, probably the most human thing she's done so far.

"Are you saying I should help you go find some place where you can hole up?"

"Yeah, someplace no one would think to try and find me."

"It isn't like there aren't eyes all over this city, man. The only place you're really ever likely to find any privacy is your own home," she says, making a perplexed expression.

"Aren't you fucking listening?" I inadvertently shout. "I'm asking you 'cause I can't go back to my house! Maybe you could, oh, I dunno, take me to your house, asshole!" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. The pain is making me lose my temper. At first I think I'm going to regret saying that, but the girl just nods in understanding, letting the entire thing slide.

"That it? Well, that's a simple request. If my house is fine with you, then you're welcome to stay."

Without even helping me to stand up by myself or offering a helping hand, she starts to walk again, the movement of her back telling me to keep close and follow. With renewed strength to my step that I didn't know from where in my battered body I obtained, I pursue her. The sound of her clacking steps, and the sensation of the asphalt and broken bottle glass beneath my feet seemed to make both the pain on my body and mind ebb. Though I haven't even asked her if she lived alone, or even what her name was, I think it too insignificant for the moment. I only see her silhouette, dimly lighted, guiding me like fate. It is the only thing I can see.

# Paradox Spiral - II

I hear the sound. An ominous metallic click, coming from the other room.

The time must be almost ten 'o clock. Dead tired from working my job into the late hours of the evening, I immediately resigned myself to the safety of my mattress after I got home. But it isn't even a few minutes before I am stirred from sleep by the sound. I heard it only once, but that is enough.

The door to my room opens, letting a slit of white light into my darkened room, widening slowly with each inch of the door that is parted. A shadow occludes the light, and I turn to towards it only to see my mom.

It's always around this part that I realize, and wish that I could never see this scene again.

The light makes it difficult to make out any detail on her figure save for the fact that she is standing. However, what little I can see of the scene beyond the doorway is clear to my eyes: my dad, collapsed over the dining room table. It isn't clear at first whether he is merely unconscious or dead, but it isn't long before I see what I first perceive to be some sort of spilled coffee. It slowly dawns on me that it is blood, dying the varnished brown table into a deep red. It is then that the shadow in front of the door speaks.

"Die, Tomoe."

I remember what comes afterwards. My mother advances, kneels in front of me, raises the kitchen knife high above her, and brings it down on my chest, then up, then down again, too many times for me to count. Then I see her taking the same knife to her throat, then in a single, determined motion, plunges it deep into her neck.

All of my nights are bookended by this nightmare, the worst I ever have.

I hear the sound. An ominous click, through which I wake up.

I turn my eyes toward the bed, only to find Ryōgi gone. I lift up my bruised and battered body to observe where I find myself in: a house in the nook of the second floor of a four-floor low rise, the house of the kimono wearing girl. Well, better to call it a room than a house, really. A one-meter long corridor barely deserving the label separates the front door and the small living room, which, seeing as the bed which she slept in is also there, probably also doubles as her bed room. Flanking the corridor to the right is the door to the bathroom. Another door in the living room leads to

another, presumably unused, room. She led me to this place last night after an hour's walk. The name plaque that rested beside the entryway bore the name "Ryōgi", so that must be her last name.

That girl—Ryōgi—never said a thing when we entered her room, only taking off her leather jacket and heading straight for her bed to fall asleep. Her apathy almost provoked me to protest, but the last thing I wanted to do was mouth off and have the neighbors be curious. After some consideration, I took a cushion lying discarded on the floor and used it as a pillow, then slept away.

And now I wake up with her nowhere to be found. I wonder what she could be up to. It looks like our ages are quite close. Considering her age, maybe she went to school? And yet, that wouldn't be at all fitting for such a drab room. The sum total of things in her room: a bed, a refrigerator, a phone, a coat rack with four leather jackets, and a closet, which I assume is for clothing. No TV, no radio, no throw-away magazines, and consequently, no table to read them on.

I suddenly remember what she said last night. When I said I'd murdered someone, she said she was the same. I only half-believed her last night, but seeing her room, it might actually be true. Her pad seems to be set for functionality, like a room designed not to be lived in, but instead for someone who could suddenly be on the run at any time and could leave the room behind. Thinking about what she said makes a chill run up my spine. Did I think luck would allow me to draw the ace of spades, but instead brought me the joker?

In any case, I don't plan on staying any longer than I have to. I want to at least give a word of thanks to Ryōgi for helping me out in a pinch, but since she's out, there's really nothing I can do. With silent and careful steps more befitting a burglar than a visitor, I make my exit from the mysterious girl's room.

Without heading toward any particular place, I loiter around town to kill the time. Initially I am hesitant, even a bit scared, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, and think at first that I made the wrong decision. But it soon becomes apparent that the world is turning like it always did, with no one giving me a second glance. The days go on with all the haste and weight of the hour hand on a clock. Somewhat disappointed at the realization, I make my way to the main avenue.

It is here in the main avenue that I expected to find cops asking around for a Tomoe Enjō, or at least people that might throw me the "I saw him

on the 6am news" look, but there are none. Maybe the bodies haven't been found yet. Still, maybe I give myself too much credit. There's no way someone like me can affect people's reactions to a noticeable degree with such a half-baked murder. Either way, it seems, for the time being at least, I'm not a fugitive. That being said, I still didn't feel like going back.

Noon comes and passes, and I find myself in Hachikō Square, right next to Shibuya Crossing. I find a bench to rest on and feel content to spend an hour or two just looking up at the neon lights set upon the buildings stretching high into the sky. When the lights turn green, the cars stop to give way to the mad press of people, flowing like water from a burst dam across the large avenue. I can't even imagine what it's like when it's a holiday. The people are mostly teenagers like me, happily smiling and with a levity to their walking pace, looking like they're the most blessed individuals in the universe. It's the face of people in their world: a world where they don't aspire to anything anymore, or need to live for a good future. There's no need to. Their life is all laid out for them, and they know that's all they need to get by in their world. So how many of those smiles are real? All of them, or only a handful? I keep looking at their faces, trying to figure out, but it's impossible to tell the real from the fake. I should have known better than to try, since that realization comes from your own self.

Tired of looking at all the people moving to and fro, I instead cast my eyes toward the sky. Let's be frank. I'm as much a fake as the rest of them. Maybe at some point in time, I thought that my life was good and real, but reality soon stripped that away.

Junior high school was my time. I was a sprinter in the track and field club, and I kicked ass in it. I participated in all of the inter-school competitions and I never, ever lost. I never even saw anyone's back. No one could say anything about my skill. All I cared about was cutting my time, and even a few milliseconds difference was enough to make me happy. I was an engine built for the sport, and I cherished it more than anything.

It follows, of course, that all this came to a screeching halt.

My family was never one blessed with an abundance of money. Dad lost his job back when I was still in grade school, and never got one back again. Mom was born into a rich family, but had a falling out with them after she ran away to marry my dad. Her world didn't teach her anything about what happens after that. I think that broken family did only one thing right for me: force me to grow up faster than other kids. I had to juggle jobs after school, lying about my age just to get in, all so I could scrape out money to pay the tuition I needed. I stopped trying to care about the antics of my parents, and began to focus only on what I could do right by myself: sustain

myself, go to school, and work my ass off for tuition. I thought of running as my only release from both the constant problem of living expenses and my parents who to me no longer seemed anything of the sort, the only reason I kept paying for school and going to the club activities without giving a heed to how tired I was.

Our troubles only truly began when my dad took the car out without a license one day. He was never really good with driving, but it had never bothered him before if he had to take his time parking or maneuvering the car. That day, however, whatever luck that had compensated for his skill ran out, and he got involved in an accident. He ran a pedestrian over. It was apparently a quick death for the unlucky guy. It forced my mom to go back to her family, head bowed and pleading for money just to pay the cost for indemnities. To me it was yet another fuckup that I needed to look away from, and so I refrained from prying too deep. What eventually concerned me is the fallout from all that. It didn't take long for everyone at school to find out about the incident, and though I thought nothing of it at first, I found that the attitude of everyone at school had changed. My coach, who had always been more helpful than anyone I could remember, suddenly started to ignore me. The upperclassmen who were so proud to have me as the rookie star of the track and field team pressured me to quit. All because of something I had no part in; all because I was their son.

My family was the real problem. Losing what little money he'd saved over to help pay for the accident, my dad was far from fit to keep a family together. Mom started to work part-time in jobs society hadn't prepared her for and she had no real idea how to do, but even that only paid for a portion of the gas and electricity bills. Rumors about the accident began to infest my neighborhood, growing and catching its own embellishments, to the point that dad couldn't even get out of the house without so much as an angry neighbor trying to give him a piece of their mind. Mom still tried to work, but the rumors always caught up to her, and it never made her stay in one place for too long. I remember one time I was just walking around when some random nobody threw a rock at me. And always, there were the threats.

Yet even though the abuses got worse and worse, I never could muster the motivation to be mad at them. After all, the one driving the car, the one really at fault then was my dad. It's all his fault. But then it's not like I hated my folks in particular back then either, because it's when I realized that whatever you do, even if you try as hard as you can, no matter how fast and how far you run, it'll all be the same. You can't escape your family, your past, or what you are. I mean, my folks walked their own path, tried

to live a life as best they could, and look where it got them. That's when I stopped trying to fight it. I figured if I just accepted it, then I wouldn't have anything to cry about. It's the moment when you're a kid and you throw away your fantasies because they're useless, and in its place grows a kind of new, self-crafted wisdom.

After that, feeling that there was little else it could teach me, I quit school. Besides, I had to work whole days now for the money. If you aren't picky there's plenty of work to be done even for people my age. Being someone still straddled with at least half a conscience, I couldn't completely abandon my family, and so I had to put money in the house. Still, that didn't mean I needed to talk to them. I never did after I quit high school. Slowly, like a poison, the joy and exhilaration in running and sprinting that I'd once found essential faded into dim memory, along with the faces of the people who once cheered me on, and the cold wind whipping past my face. It was something I'd thought I couldn't ever live without at one point, and to find that I'd essentially thrown it away gave me no small measure of surprise. My mind made its customary excuses: I didn't need it anymore, there were more important things. But they were only excuses. I lost. I gave up.

That's the proof that I'm fake. If "running" was some sort of origin, a cosmic impetus laid out for the boy known as Tomoe Enjō, then I had failed it. And maybe, my mind thought, things would have turned out better if I had just indulged that call.

My parents took me to see a stud farm once when I was little. There I looked at all the nameless horses, whose lives were bred and figures built solely for the singular act of running, and I cried, thinking that if such a thing as a previous incarnation was truer than a tale spun for the naïve idea of destiny, then I must surely have been one of those beautiful beasts. My passion was born there. And it was killed by the weight of the real. I ultimately amounted to nothing more than a sham, imbued with dreams that only lie.

And in the end, I became a murderer. I laugh, though there is nothing truly funny about it. The sky I look at hardly changes, and I turn my eyes back to the spectacle of the city, where at least the people move, never stopping, with their smiling and content faces, all of us dolls as fake as anyone else with no real purpose. Or maybe they *do* have a real purpose: to fool around. They are in Shibuya after all. That's the brand of reality I can't really tolerate, though.

The collective footsteps of the throng bring me back to reality. Positioned above the entryway to a nearby building is a clock, showing the time nearing evening. Not wanting to loiter here any more than I've already allowed

myself, I push myself up and out of the bench and leave the mass of people, heading for no particular direction.

Even here in the housing district the streetlamps shine no brighter than in any other part of the city. I've been walking aimlessly for the past three hours, and the autumn sun has long since set, reminding me that I still need a place to stay for the night. Without thinking about it, I find myself back in the familiar façade of Ryōgi's apartment building. Though I always thought that I could let go of lingering affections easily when the situation demanded it, judging by where my wandering feet took me, it seems that's not the case. I look to the second floor, and find that her window is dark. Looks like she isn't home.

"Well, since I'm here anyway..." I mutter under my breath as I start to climb the stairs to the second floor, squaring myself with the fact that the only reason I'm doing this is to hang on pathetically to the last person that helped me in my life. The metal treaded staircase rings a harsh sound as I ascend as if to announce my presence. Confronting the door of Ryōgi's room, I find that the newspaper that was slipped under her door as I left this morning is nowhere to be found. At first I think that she's inside, but when I rap on the door, no response follows. So she came home at least once. Deciding to leave if the door is locked, I reach for the doorknob and turn it.

But it moves unhindered, and the door slips ever so slightly open. As I saw back in the street, the lights inside look like they aren't turned on. In the silence, even the mechanical clicking of the doorknob is audible, and for a moment, it freezes my hand and blanks my mind in hesitation. Thinking myself ridiculous for standing there doing nothing for such a long time, I slowly widen the opening I've made and creep inside. I probably would never have thought as a kid that I would be committing trespass after killing someone not a few days earlier, and yet here I am. Well, she did say I was welcome in her house, but I don't know if this is what she meant by that.

While my mind is busy making excuses, my body is creeping forward, closing the door, going past the entrance, past the short corridor, and finally into her living room. It's black as pitch in here. Nothing can be heard except my muffled footsteps and my suspiciously rough respiration. Man, this makes me look like any random break and enter. Fuck, I need a light. The lights, where the fuck are the lights? I start to take a hand to the wall and feel around for the switch.

At that point, I hear the distinct sound of the front door opening. The person turns on the lights faster than I could even begin to consider who it is. As the fluorescent lamp casts a warm glow over the room, she looks at me with slightly surprised eyes that blink twice before she starts talking.

"Oh, you're here. I hope you weren't doing anything inappropriate, what with lights being off and all," she says in the manner of someone just berating a classmate. She closes the door and takes off her jacket, then sits down on her bed, rifling through the plastic bag she's holding and producing a small cup. "Wanna eat it? Cold things just don't do it for me."

She tosses the cup toward me, and up close I can see that it's a cup of Haagen-Dazs strawberry. Why she doesn't care about my trespassing is as much a mystery to me as her buying something she doesn't even like. Taking the cold cup in my hands makes me think. She knows I'm a murderer, though I don't know how seriously she takes it. And yet she offered her room to me. I remember what I thought this morning: that her room looked like she was some sort of fugitive ready to run at a moment's notice.

"Square one thing with me, Ryōgi," I say to her. "Are you someone I should be keeping one eye open for when I sleep?"

Contrary to what I expect, she laughs quite heartily at my question. "You're a strange one, aren't you? A nice way to phrase that question, I have to say," she says in between bouts of raucous laughter that throws her already mismanaged hair into even greater disarray. The sight only tells me to be more cautious than before. At length, her laughter finally starts to die down, and she exhales one long breath before she continues to talk. "Hah, well, it's true that this place has a shortage of people that can carry themselves in a fight better than I can. But hey, you're here aren't you? Since we're both stuck with our respective pieces of wood in each other's eye, let's just leave them in there and keep our peace. Is that all you wanted to talk about?"

The kimono-clad girl looks up at me with a dangerously calm countenance of a child expecting to get a new present, her grin laden with meaning. "No, there's something else I need to ask. Why did you help me?"

"Cause you asked me to, that's why. I wasn't doing anything at the time anyway, so hey, what the hell. By the way, you don't have a place to sleep right? I meant it when I said you could use my place for now. Not like Mikiya's going to come by in a while, anyway."

Because she wasn't doing anything? What the hell kind of reason is that? My brain might be a bit frazzled lately, but not to the extent that I'd believe what she just said. I glare at her, which seems to garner no reaction. She

only ignores me, not—I sense—out of indifference, but of a dignified sort of oblivion that just comes naturally to her. It's an alluring paradox. Still, I realize that Ryōgi hasn't given me any real reason to lie to me. Maybe she does have no particular reason to take me in. She could have invented any number of excuses to leech money from me by doing this, but she didn't. But even so...

"Are you serious? You take me in no questions asked without even being suspicious of me? You sure you aren't high?"

"You are seriously damaging your goodwill here, buddy. And to answer your question seriously, no I don't take drugs, and to answer the question percolating in your mind, no I didn't report you to the police this morning. Although I will if you tell me to."

Well, nothing to worry about on that front. Besides, just the thought of this person talking to the police in polite tones seems like an impossible picture to paint in my mind. "Then what are you after? Is it a quick fuck, because—"

"Huh? There's far better places a man can go to for sex in this town than my place, that's for damn sure."

"Well, see, what I'm saying is—"

"Alright, fine, whatever man! If you don't like it here and you're just gonna stand there and criticize me then you know the way to the door, buddy. I absolutely do not understand why you feel the need to judge every word out of my mouth, you know that?"

Her words brook no refusal. A silence hangs between us, but is broken by her rummaging through the plastic convenience store bag again, pulling out a triangularly-shaped tomato sandwich. Well, if I had any doubts about whether or not she thought nothing of me before, I don't now.

"Well...then I'm sleeping over! You said it was fine, didn't you?" I say maybe a bit too loudly. Ryōgi, for her part, doesn't even seem all that angry, even though her words seem to indicate otherwise.

"Yeah, go ahead. I'll be sure to tell you if your asshole glands are working up again," she says while nibbling on the sandwich. At that, I suddenly realize how tired I am and promptly sit myself down on the floor. Time passes, but I can't seem to give a mind to how long or how short that lasts. I turn my thoughts away from my little spat with Ryōgi to more practical matters. I'd found a place to sleep, if only temporarily. The 30,000 yen in loose change I hastily took with me should last me the month for food, but finding some way to work so I can survive while still hiding from the cops is going to be key.

Wait. Now I remember what I was supposed to ask Ryōgi. How could I

forget?

"Hey," I call to her. "Why ain't your door locked?"

"Lost the key, obviously." Her answer is almost like a blow to the back of my head. "I only lock the door when I'm sleeping, and I just close the door when I'm out. Works for me, and as you can see, not much here for a burglar to burgle."

So my attempted trespassing wasn't just some lucky coincidence. Her not locking the room might even be the reason for why she barely has anything in the room. Some regular thief could be slipping in and just stealing what isn't nailed down. It's too much of an assault on my regular sensibility that I have to tell her off.

"Christ, girl. You could at least ask for a spare one from the landlord."

"Lost the spare too. C'mon, it's not as if you have to worry about it, and it's not as if I need one."

It's really starting to grate on me how she just takes everything in stride. I can't have any sort of peace of mind without a key. Meanwhile, Ryōgi here seems to lack the part of your brain that's supposed to sound warning alarms when you aren't secure even in your own home. I forget about my anger toward her some minutes ago and replace it with worry for this reckless girl.

"A house without a key ain't a house. Just you wait; I'll get you a new key." An idea suddenly forms in my mind. I remembered the last job I managed to hold down, until two days ago at least, was in a moving company. I got to learn a few things about fixing some household related stuff, so a simple doorknob replacement wouldn't be beyond me. They must have some kind of regular doorknob in that warehouse of theirs. "No, scratch that. I'll replace the whole damn thing."

"Well, whatever floats your boat. Do you have money for it?"

"Of course I do. It's the least I could do for you. In fact, I'll even do it tonight, so you'll have no problem tomorrow!"

And on saying that, I stand up immediately, filled with a force of will whose origin even I couldn't even begin to guess. I run towards the entrance, twist the doorknob, swing open the door, and break out into a run into the city canopied by night, barely allowing Ryōgi a word in edgewise. Here I am, a wanted (or soon-to-be-wanted) man sprinting to a moving company I planned to rob in the dead of night, putting some serious thought into how I could slip in without getting caught. Forget Ryōgi. Going on this little excursion for a girl whose first name I didn't even know pretty much makes me the certified crazy one.

# Paradox Spiral - III

I've been living with Ryōgi for close to a week now. Over time, we've established a simple pattern to our lifestyle. She wakes up, sometimes going out earlier than me. Sometime later, I go out for the day as well, and we only really see each other's faces again when I come back to sleep at night. It's strange business to be sure. At some point, we gave each other our names, thinking that it'd be quite strange to not know each other's names when it's obvious I'd be over for some time.

Shiki Ryōgi. A repeating high school student...well, on paper at least, considering her current truant history. That's pretty much the sum total of what I know about her.

She calls me by my last name, Enjō, which is why I might be given to referring to her similarly as Ryōgi. She's said more than once that she didn't like being called by her surname, but I can't bring myself to call her Shiki. It's a pretty simple reason. Calling someone by their first name has always seemed to me to be like some stamp of permanence, but this daily life right now is as temporary a setup as I can imagine, which means someday, me and Ryōgi will part ways. At any given time I could be actively hunted by the police. I could be forced to run. Calling her Shiki, with all the baggage that the first name tends to give you, will just weigh me down when that day comes.

"Don't you have a girlfriend, Enjō?"

On this night, like all the other nights, Ryōgi sits cross-legged atop her bed, and as always, asks me a question that seems to come straight out of nowhere. As for me, rolling around on the floor right next to her bed, I've long become accustomed to them.

"If I had one, I wouldn't need to swing by this dump every night, would I?"

"That's kind of strange, considering you're not all that shabby looking."

"That actually sounds more like an insult than a complement, coming from you. And besides, I've had enough of women."

"Interesting. Why, I wonder?" She lies down on the bed, which from my position on the floor next to it, makes her temporarily unseen, though she soon pops her head out directly above mine. She's actually kind of cute like this. "Are you gay?"

I take that back. Seeing her as anything resembling cute must have been

a trick of the mind.

"No way. It's just that, well...I've got a history with girls, and it didn't work out too well." Before I know it, I'm already reminiscing with her. "Back in high school, I went out with a girl for two months, and we spent most of that quality time arguing. I didn't want anything special from the relationship, but she certainly did. She wanted all the cool, fancy things that also happened to be expensive. I could practically hear my wallet screaming at the time, but I still did it for her. When I could buy her things, she was happy. When I couldn't, she complained. That didn't warm me to the experience. And the sex wasn't all it's cracked up to be, honestly. Besides, I could've just jacked off if I wanted to feel good."

I thought this story would bore Ryōgi, but she actually seems to be hanging on every word, so I continue with a sigh. "Eventually, I started to dislike her. All the money and affection I gave her slowly looked more like a waste of time. Maybe if I was a normal student, I could've given her more of my time, but as it stood then, I didn't have that kind of freedom. The hours I spent with her started draining any hours I had left for sleep. Without the free time, I guess it was doomed from the start. But, stupid as I was, I never tried breaking up with her. I never liked to hurt or get hurt, and it was definitely one of those times where I could've made her cry."

"But you *did* break up with her, didn't you? How did you do it?" Ryōgi asks, intrigued.

"Hey, I ain't the bad guy here. She dumped me. One night, after we had sex at a motel, she turned towards me on the bed and said—and this is a direct quote I swear—that I never really looked at her. That I only looked at her appearance and not her heart. Now that was a real sucker punch right there." Before I even finish talking, I already hear the spasms of laughter from Ryōgi going from chuckle to guffaw. When I shrug my shoulders as I finish my story, her head disappears back toward the bed, and she finally lets the suppressed laughter out.

"Wow, you *are* a piece of work, Enjō! 'Didn't look at her heart?' That was a girl with a lot of baggage, I can tell you that." I hear the springs on her bed creaking as she rolls to and fro in her bed, laughing accusatorily.

"Well, at least I never made the mistake of making fun of children's love. It ain't funny." I stand up, indignant, which makes Ryōgi restrain her laughter by degrees. She rubs her eyes before she sits up and looks at me straight.

"But it *is* funny, Enjō. You just don't see it. I mean, look, what's the only thing people can see of other people? Their appearance! She thinks her appearance is so insignificant, and yet she forces you to buy all that flashy

bullshit. And then she asks you to somehow look at her ‘heart’ or something, which no one can really see? Shit ain’t right, man. So you see, it’s funny! If she wanted to you to see her heart, she could’ve been better served writing some literature down on paper. Breaking up with her was the best thing that ever happened to you, Enjō.”

She returns to lying down on the bed, facing away from me. There is a beat of silence before she looks back at me again, her catlike eyes staring into me. She starts to open her mouth somewhat pensively, but hesitates and looks away, then looks back again before she finally speaks.

“Well, just so you know there’s no hard feelings, I’ll tell you something someone once told me. He said that ‘it’s those unseen, unvoiced things that form love. And it isn’t right to give voice to them, or else they might turn into lies.’ That’s what he said anyway.” At that, she turns away from me again, and I know then that she’s already closed her eyes to sleep. With that abrupt end to our conversation, I turn off the lights and lie down on the floor to sleep as well, letting the rare silence engulf the room and allowing myself to think. I accept that I might have slipped up with one girl, but my mind entertains the thought. What if—what if it was this girl? Would the same things still apply? Or would she, as she always seems inclined to do, just laugh it off and accept it?

I come back to Ryōgi’s room one night on the second week of my extended stay. I plunge the key inside the lock, turn it, and open the door. I walk inside to find Ryōgi already sleeping. Though the noise I’m making just stepping into her room is probably enough to wake her, she doesn’t. She must be sound asleep, or else ascribing my footfalls to a category of acceptable noise not worth waking up to. Either way is good.

I hold a palm to my cheek, still smarting from being hit, as I approach my usual spot on the floor and sit down. The clock on the desk beside Ryōgi’s bed ticks the time away as the second hand moves to the next mark, and the next, on and on in a circle. At the moment, both the minute and hour hand lie at peace pointing at twelve. I’ve never liked the analog ones. Staring at them, I always feel like I could slowly lose myself in the rotating, spiraling hands. The pain from the kicks I received in my leg flares up again, and I utter a low grunt of complaint in spite of myself. Ryōgi however, still remains unmoving, allowing me to look at her face deep in her deathly, petrified sleep. In two weeks of staying in this empty room, one thing always arrests my vision. When Ryōgi sleeps, she looks almost like a doll, a lifeless thing sleeping atop the bed; so much so that when the sun rises,

she doesn't "awaken," but performs something I liken to an act of resurrection, as if life has been breathed into her for another day.

At first, I thought that she woke up early for school but I soon realized that was not the case. It's always a phone call that gives Ryōgi the impetus to actually go out. She waits for it everyday. If no call comes, she confines herself here, consumed again by the doll-like languor. Needless to say, while I didn't know the subject of those calls, they were no doubt about something dangerous, something that excites Ryōgi enough to have the willingness to go outside.

The interminable ticking of the clock burrows its way deep into my head as I ponder on the simplicity of Ryōgi, her beautiful life devoid of any sadness, returning only to a joyous vitality when she does whatever it is she needs to do. The perfectly empty life without overindulgence, the existence of the "real" that I never thought I would find. The sort of Platonic ideal of existence that I wanted to become.

"Shiki." The word escapes my lips, more silent than a whisper and seeping out like a silent exhalation, and yet, seemingly at cue, Ryōgi chooses that exact moment to wake up. A crease forms between her eyes as she looks me over.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asks. Guess she noticed all the bruises on me.

"Had no choice," I sigh. "Two guys I didn't even know tried to jump me, and since they were spoiling for a fight, it got messy. Not really good at this whole fighting business, so there you go."

"You must have studied something, at least. And yet, you still have trouble beating on two guys. What, does getting hurt turn you on?" Ryōgi observes wryly as she pushes herself up from the bed.

"Don't assume anything. I've never taken any sort of class in a martial art. Still, if it comes to a fight I can give as good as the next guy."

"Which is to say, not much at all. I thought for sure you learned something, since I saw you use the palm of your hand to fight when we first met. So where'd you learn that?"

"I heard somewhere that for someone who wasn't used to it, using your fists would just hurt you as much as you hurt them. So it's better for people like me to just use the palm. Besides, isn't the palm harder? I mean, look at cans. No one punches a can. Everyone crushes it with their palm, right? There's something there, man."

"It's cause it's easier that way, dumbass," she says with the usual calmness in her voice. This time though, I detect a sense of faint praise from it as well. Her eyes are as intense as they ever are, and it makes me break eye

contact with her from embarrassment.

"How about you, Ryōgi? You must have studied aikidō or something."

"Just a passing interest in aikidō, actually. I've only been really serious with one style that I've been into ever since I was a spoiled brat."

"Since you were a kid? No wonder you could plant a roundhouse in the back of a running guy's head. I'm guessing that's not all there is to your style, though." Though I only intended it to be a casual statement, Ryōgi takes my last sentence to think on seriously.

"Kind of. It's sort of a style of my own. The key to it is the mindset. You rethink everything about yourself. Your breathing, your footwork, your perspective, how you think—even the way you move your muscles changes, and it's almost like becoming someone else. All of it is honed towards taking down your enemy as economically as possible. I mean, I suppose all martial arts touch on it to some extent, but I guess we...I mean, I took it too far."

She spits the last words out as if she hated the entire concept, to which I have to react with some amusement. "What's so bad about that? At least you don't get hit like me, and you get to take out two dudes in two seconds. It's one cool self-made style if you ask me."

Her eyes wander away from me, and seem to hint at some heavy disquiet before she replies. "Weird thing about that self-made style: I learned it by sort of watching someone else do it."

When she immediately plops back down on the bed, I get the feeling she doesn't want to continue the conversation anymore. As she goes back to sleep, I'm left to contemplate what exactly her last words meant.

In a room in a slice of nothingness, dull gray steam rises, the hissing sharp enough to pierce the ears. There is a heat here enough to make anyone break into sweat in moments. The room is unlit, save for the dim orange glow of something burning on an iron plate. All around me, there are large canisters lined up one after another, and on the floor, I feel countless amounts of narrow tubing brush against my legs.

Not a single soul can be found in the room. Only the hissing of the billowing steam and the useless sound of bubbling water keep each other company.

I wake up violently to a cold, dead night. A dream. It was a dream. A nightmare maybe, different from the usual one. Still, there was little to like about it. The second hand on the clock ticks away as if to mock me, and

when I turn to look at it, I see the time has not even passed 3:00am. Still quite a while before I usually wake up.

The next thing I notice is that the familiar shape of Ryōgi lying on the bed is gone. Must be another one of her strolls. She does them every so often. Why they need to be done at an ungodly hour when even the fauna sleep is beyond me. I worry about her sometimes. Even though she can fight, that doesn't make it all right for her to take a walk so late alone in a city full of people ready to take advantage of that. I briefly think about going out to find her, even though I know full well that not messing with each other's private lives has become some sort of unspoken rule for me to live here.

Ah, fuck it, I'll go. She's pretty enough that it's going to be hard for all the thugs down in Shinsen to just let her pass by without incident. I rise, and as I'm about to open the door to go out into the hallway, the door unexpectedly opens with to admit a girl dressed in a familiar kimono and leather jacket inside. Ryōgi promptly closes it with as little sound as she made opening it.

"Hey, you're home," I say. She casts her glare upwards to look at me. And in that moment, I feel something.

She could kill me.

The lights in the hallway behind her are turned off, and only Ryōgi's eyes shine a frighteningly deep blue in the darkness. My breathing is cut off, and for a while, my mind spaces out and I stand stock still unable to do anything in that moment of pure dread.

"You won't do either," Ryōgi says, not even trying to hide the consternation in her voice. When she speaks, I snap back to normalcy. She brushes past me, taking off her jacket and flinging it across the room toward her bed in anger. She takes a seat on top of the bed and lazily leans back on the wall behind her, offering an upturned head and a blank stare towards the ceiling.

Trying to ignore the chill that is still running the circuit of my spine, I make an awkward about-face from the door and return to the living room to sit down in a random spot on the floor. The invisible third inhabitant of this room—the unseen and heavy silence that blankets everything—again passes between us, as it does so commonly, until she breaks it with her monotone words.

"I went out to kill."

Unable to form any sort of appropriate response to her, I only nod my head to acknowledge what she said. She seems to take it as a sign to continue.

"Useless. I couldn't find anyone I wanted to kill. When I opened the door and you were there, I thought that you could satisfy me for a time, but you couldn't. Killing you would've been meaningless."

"I honest to God thought you were going to kill me right then and there," I reply hesitantly but truthfully.

"I want to feel like I'm alive. But I know a simple murder has no meaning. It's why I drift aimlessly at the late hours, trying to find a reason to live. It's almost like being a ghost. One day...I just know I'm going to kill someone for no reason." The words come out like a conversation thrown toward some unseen presence as much as it does a disclosure confided in me, almost resembling the torpid speech of a junkie on withdrawal. This is the first time I've seen her like this. The first time we met was during one of her nightly strolls, but she didn't seem to be spoiling for a fight back then.

"Get a grip on yourself, Ryōgi. You'll manage," I tell her, as I stand up and place my hands on her shoulders. Shoulders that seem so unnaturally slender for someone as dangerous as her.

"I am managing. This is how I do it. I got this feeling back in summer too, and that time when—" her speech trails off, like she just remembered a memory she'd like to forget. I sit back down on the floor, and Ryōgi takes that as a sign to abandon her position on the wall and collapse on top of the bed sideways.

"Hey, Ryōgi," I probe, not really expecting any further clarification. She's the one that said to me that the heart is unvoiced and unknown to all except you, lest it turn into a lie. It's easy to understand. She's all alone. I was once like that, but at least I had, if not real friends, then just people who I could distract myself with so that the problem wouldn't be so obvious. But she doesn't have that luxury. She had no need of them.

"Hey, Ryōgi," I repeat, letting my back rest against the bed so I wouldn't see her. "Do you have any friends?" Some seconds pass to delay her response before she speaks again.

"Yeah. I think I do."

"Wait, you do?" I say incredulously, expecting a completely opposite answer. In contrast, Ryōgi just nods calmly. "Then there's an easy solution! Just go to them and dump all your problems on their lap so they help you. It's the best and easiest thing to do in your condition. Even just small talk is usually enough to make you forget all about it."

"Well, he's not here now. He's out of town, doing God knows what." I fall silent listening to the echo of loneliness in her words, but then, as if to say that the spirit of her solitude was only something I imagined, she starts to hit the bed violently with her clenched fists. "I mean, that guy just barges

in here without so much as a warning, and how does he return the favor? Oh, nothing except a freaking phone number, is all. He even had to take a nappynap in bed for a whole month while I took care of business last summer. Why do I have to be constantly irritated at him? I mean, what an asshole, right?"

The sound of her fist hitting a pillow repeats itself, and her voice grows increasingly louder with each new sentence of her spontaneous rant. I almost can't believe that Ryōgi is getting this much of a rise from a single question. Now the dull thuds turn into sounds of sharp stabbing, almost like Ryōgi is piercing the pillow with a knife. I don't think I really want to know exactly what she's doing so I restrain my curiosity to turn around and look. In a little while, the tearing sounds stop and she finally calms down. As for me, I kind of become envious at this friend who can raise her to such heights of emotion (for her at least), and at the risk of further reaction, I decide to ask her about this person.

"Say, Ryōgi..." No answer. Guess she must still be mad. I pay it no mind and continue. "This friend of yours from your school or something? What's he like?"

"Yeah, from high school," Ryōgi responds nonchalantly. "Guy with a name like a poet." I decide not to puzzle out the meaning to that just yet.

"So this guy is the reason you go out at night, isn't he?"

"Nah. My urge to go out at night and kill is just me being me. What's the matter? You really wanna find out what could possibly make me scary enough for you to practically wet yourself when I went in?"

"What, me, scared? I'm not—"

"You're the one that said you thought I was going to kill you." Her voice is a cold sing-song tune that latches itself onto the nape of my neck, tracing a chokingly smooth line around it, and for a moment, I am forced to wonder if the person lying behind me is truly human. "See? You're thinking it again. But rest easy. It's the danger that really pumps those pleasure chemicals for me, and killing you wouldn't be so dangerous now, would it? Still, it would probably be best for you to find a new place to hide, Enjō. In the end, the pleasure I get from murder is going to bite me in the ass, and you with it."

Her intonation falls to the volume one expects of an act of contrition. Goddamn it. The only thing it does for me is make an already distant woman even more distant and inscrutable. I understand now; that easily as much as I am terrified of this implacable person—

—I have fallen for her just as much.

"Dumbass. That's not like you and you know it," I say. "That's just you

being upset. You've got two options here: mope, or call that friend of yours and go through it together. That's what friends are for, and if you don't do it, you'll just cut yourself off from society—”

Awkwardly, my words cut off at that point. Like Ryōgi a few minutes ago, my mouth was starting to take over my mind and spouted the first thing that came to mind. With both of us noting the strange pause, I decide to end the conversation. “Well, that's all I wanted to say. Good night, Ryōgi.” I then proceed to lie sprawled on the floor, still not permitting myself to look at her.

She says something to me, but I ignore it as I try to sink into slumber from the embarrassment. For tonight at least, I've lost all confidence to talk with Ryōgi. It's a pretty simple reason. When I was saying those words, when I don't even have a friend to call my own like Ryōgi does, I felt like the biggest hypocritical bastard alive.

## Paradox Spiral - IV

Here, back in the dilapidated back alley where I first met Ryōgi, even the buzzing sounds of the city streets turn into nothing more than distant echoes coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. I can remember the blood here so vividly that I can even recall their bitter smell. But they're gone now, swept up, like everything else, into the alley grime and the cold of the late October morning. Even the white puff of air that quickly disappears as I exhale is a testament to this phenomenon. From the same everywhere and nowhere that the flood of people are located, I single out the sound of a clock and its ticking, imagining the hands going round and round.

It's now been a month since I threw away my home and my livelihood and ran away. And yet, there is still no visible indication that the police are after me, or even actively investigating what I did. Every day, I pass by the window of a nearby electronics store with a display television tuned to the news. I watch diligently, but up till now it has not reported anything on the murder I committed. The story is the same for the newspapers I can spy or steal from the stands. What I did was far more than a simple, random murder. No, it's the kind of thing that journalists can't resist putting up on the 6:30 news for the public to go crazy about, no matter what police embargo they were under.

Maybe they haven't found it? No, that can't be possible. Still, the thought of the bodies not being found after a month makes something churn in my stomach in a feeling almost like nausea, and engulfs me in a sense of melancholy. I briefly entertain the idea of checking to see if they're still there, but pass on it because I don't have the guts to, and the possibility of any five-oh staking the place out to see if I'll come back. I suppose there's nothing else to do except sit here on the sidelines and wait for any sort of sign.

Still, at least once...at least once I want to see it on television so I can finally have an excuse to disappear from Ryōgi's life. Once the name Tomoe Enjō rings out in society as a the name of a murderer, I'll only cause trouble for Ryōgi, and that's when I can finally cut what little ties we have and make my exit from this wretched city. But maybe that's already too late for me.

The clock echoes from its indeterminate location, and the wind seems to grow in strength with each recurring tick. Following the course of the cold north wind, I walk away from the alley.

As I exit the maze of back lanes, I notice a familiar figure come into

view in a far pedestrian crossing. Who else could it be in a kimono and a leather jacket except Ryōgi? And yet, even further away from her I manage to see another faintly familiar face: one of the guys present on that violent night when me and Ryōgi first met. With well-practiced steps, he lurks a ways behind Ryōgi, trying not to draw attention to himself.

This could get bad. I stand there for a moment debating what to do, but the ticking of the clock forces me to action. I make my way into and through the press of people and stalk the man stalking Ryōgi. It doesn't take very long and far for another of his number to join the man, the same person that Ryōgi delivered a roundhouse to. It doesn't seem like they plan on doing anything to her, or they'd have done it already; there were plenty of chances for them in the past few minutes to do so away from prying eyes. Instead, they seem to be content in keeping watch on her for now. Surprisingly enough, they seem organized and rehearsed, with not a single step out of place or fumbled. After an hour, the front-and-follow show comes to an end with the two breaking off their tail. Curious as to their destination, I continue to shadow them as they quicken their pace to head into—

—the same alley I was in an hour ago.

This looks like a trap, but if it's for me or for Ryōgi, and for what purpose, I can't know. The disquiet in me grows. I slip beside the entrance to the alleyway, where the space is graduated into a narrow passageway, and stop to listen. I turn my head little by little around the corner to sneak a glance at what the two could be doing. As my vision pans over to what little I can see inside, I freeze at what I see.

A man in a vivid wine-red long coat, whose silhouette tells of long, tall, and slender features, stands in the middle of the alleyway. His hair is a long, blonde fall from head to back. Even from this distance, I can see the condescending, almost pitying expression on his face as he opens his mouth to speak.

“■■■■■——” He speaks in a language that echoes out in power, and magic, and ambition. And though I don't understand it, I somehow understand the fluency with which he wields it.

I feel someone's presence behind me and quickly turn to meet whoever it was, but find no one there. I swing my head back to look at the alleyway, but in that small span of an instant that could not have been more than a second, the man had vanished.

The north wind blows through the alleyway, passing through me, seemingly more frigid now than before. I shiver in spite of myself, and hold my arms close to my body. The shiver starts to intensify uncontrollably, and

for no particular reason, an urge to cry takes over me, and I barely resist it. In that urge, I feel in my skin a tremble of entropy, the end of an autumn, and in my bare face I feel the very end of me.

When night falls and me and Ryōgi are back at her room, I tell her all about what happened this morning. As usual, however, her reply is concise to the point of unhelpfulness.

“Really?” She draws the word out with a barely suppressed yawn. “And?”

“Don’t fucking ‘and?’ me! Those guys weren’t the only one watching you. Do you remember seeing any foreign dude with a red long coat?”

“Hmm, guy sounds like a ball to hang out with. But no, I don’t.” She quickly loses her interest in the conversation, just as she always does in anything she deems of no real or immediate consequence. I have a feeling that even if you falsely accuse her of murder, she’ll pay it no real heed. To her, the weight of external events is far less important than her own feelings. Sometimes, I almost feel like I want to emulate that state of mind, but this was a moment of exception. That man was as real as anything I’ve ever seen, containing something like a purity similar to Shiki Ryōgi, and beyond my reach.

“Can you just listen for one second to what I’m saying? It’s not like this is someone else’s problem. It’s yours!” My yelling somehow gets Ryōgi to prop herself up on the bed and sit atop it with crossed legs. She looked at me as I tried my hardest to show a stern face. After staring each other down for a brief moment, she speaks.

“Alright, I get it, it’s a problem. What I don’t get is why you’re so worked up about this, Enjō.”

“I worry because you’re an idiot and wouldn’t know better.” A brief pause. “I don’t want you to get hurt or anything.” A gulp, a moment’s glance away from her, and then, “because I love you, goddamit.”

The bickering atmosphere seemed to evaporate in an instant. There, I said it. The word that should never be. Even though I promised not to say it on account of me leaving eventually. Ryōgi, for her part, looks at me with cocked brow, as if observing some quaint curiosity. Several seconds pass in this way until she finally...

...bursts out laughing. Her first laugh was so sudden that she would have spitted out milk if she had any in her mouth.

“What—” She tries to stop herself from laughing but can’t. “What the hell, Enjō? Shit ain’t right, man. You’re not in love with me. You’re just—”

Another fit of boisterous laughter. “You’ve just been hypnotized or something by that guy in a red coat. Take a flashback, I’m sure you’ll remember a pendulum dangling in front of you!”

So even this is a matter to laugh off. Her disbelief only agitates me further.

“No, it’s the god’s honest truth! When I saw you, it was the first time I saw anyone so real, and someone so like me. But you—you’re not fake like everyone else. I’d do anything for you to believe me.”

I draw closer to Ryōgi and put my hands atop her shoulders. That reduces her laughter to a giggle, and finally stops it altogether. I see her shift her eyes to look at my arm, and then back at me.

“I see,” she says dryly. Suddenly, she grasps my shirt collar with blinding speed. With one smooth movement, she throws me like paper over and atop the bed, leaving me looking upwards with her face looming close above mine as she lies on top of me. I have no idea when she had the time to produce the knife that she is now holding in her free hand. “Then will you die for me?”

I feel the tip of the blade prick my neck ever so lightly, and see Ryōgi’s eyes narrow into a sinister glint. I know at that moment that her question isn’t whether I would die doing something for her, but if I would allow her to kill me for her own pleasure, nonchalant and indifferent as she always is. The only way she can show any real affection. I’m scared, so scared of death that my body is paralyzed by it. And yet, I don’t have long for this world anyway. One day, the police are going to come knocking, and then there’ll be no going back. And it is with that consideration that I say:

“Yeah. I’d gladly die for you.” There is the tiniest shift, the smallest movement on Ryōgi’s brow, and it lets me know that I said something she didn’t expect, and for a moment, she hesitated, and her eyes slightly return to familiarity. “Do it. Kill me. It’s not going to be long now anyway. I killed my parents, and that means the death penalty. I’d rather have you kill me than the law and a noose.”

“You’re a parricide?” I can still feel the knife tip keenly on my neck, but the strength behind its grip has ebbed noticeably. There, before I die, I decide to lay bare the horrible memory that haunts me, just to convince myself I took my one last opportunity at penance.

“Yeah, killed both of them. They were no good—kept racking up debts that I didn’t know about and wasting all of the money. Had enough dealing with their bullshit, so I took a kitchen knife to their guts and stabbed them over and over, to make sure I didn’t make any mistake. That night was cold as hell, but those organs and intestines...they were all so *warm*. Like you

could feel the heat going up from their spilled guts and it wrapped all over you. It almost made me go numb and crazy. My fingers wouldn't let go of the knife, and my arm just kept going up and down, up and down by itself. You couldn't tell whether I took a knife to them to kill, or if I just wanted to go crazy and mix up some human insides; you couldn't even tell whether a person killed them, or an animal."

I think that it would only be appropriate for me to break down in tears now, but the tears won't come. Instead, I feel a strange sort of relief, as if killing my parents truly did make me find freedom.

"Tomoe, why did you kill them?" Her voice hangs on the border between inquisitiveness and pity as she asks the question I know would come. What was the answer, then? Was it because I hated them? Because they were more trouble than they were worth? Only lies I whisper in silent nights to salve the memory. The truth, the real reason is,

"I was scared...of a dream. A dream where I come home from my job late at night and lie down on my bed. I can hear the shouting match between my mom and dad from the other side of the door, but the noise stops. Soon after, the door opens, my mother standing in the doorway, and beyond her, my dad covered in blood and lying dead. Then my mother kneels down on top of me, brings up a knife to stab me over and over before she slits her own throat. The dream is so real, I thought I'd really died. But morning came and I woke up just the same. That's supposed to be the end of it, right? Just my desire to kill my parents manifesting itself one night, right? But when I started to see it every single fucking night, every time waking up breathing hard, almost screaming, I couldn't stand it. I was scared of that fictional night where the dream would come alive. And one night, I decided I couldn't stand to experience it one more night, and I broke. So I killed them, before they could kill me."

I remember that night as clearly as a happy memory. I'd hid the kitchen knife beside the mattress, and when mom opened the door for some reason or another, I charged her, knife out and straight towards her chest. I stabbed her over and over, as if to make up for all the times I had been stabbed myself in my dreams. And with that, I was free from my useless folks, free from that ominous dream, with nothing to tie me down. A dirty, bloodstained freedom.

"You're one goddamned idiot, you know that?" says Ryōgi frankly, with a lack of restraint that snaps me out of my reverie. She's right, more resoundingly and more profoundly than probably even she knows. I'm one hell of an idiot to have not thought of any other way out of my situation except to kill my own parents. But even now, I don't regret it for a second.

I'd sooner be caught by the police and be put behind bars than to have endured another day of my former life. But I did realize one thing when I was explaining my crime to Ryōgi: how can a boy who has only ever looked out and cared for himself start to care about a stranger like Ryōgi? It seems like some sort of fallacy, a lingering paradox, an act to which I do not have any right to perform. Knowing this, it's probably no mystery why she just laughed off my proposal. But that doesn't sway my love for her, the one thought that I find in me to be truly real, if still regrettably tainted by my sin. When I realize this, the fever of passion that had seized me minutes ago began to subside. But even in this paradox, I still consider the murder a necessary action, and for me there are no regrets.

Ryōgi's eyes hanging above me are distant and unclouded as they stare into me, studying every quiver of the lip shaped by spoken words and every crease and line formed on my face from unspoken emotion.

"You misunderstood your choices. If your parents were like that, and you've lasted until now, then you could have borne that pain a bit more, like you always did; chosen the easier way. But in the end, you had to make it harder for yourself. When I first met you, I thought you were trying to deny who you were. You were empty. So here's the question: did you change since that night? Or do you want to die now just as much as you wanted to then?" asks the girl who would kill me on a whim, the girl I had surrendered my life to.

She is right again. Another contradiction. I tried to cast my life away on that night, thinking it alright to murder someone in a deserted alley, but also thinking it wouldn't be so bad for the same thing to happen to me. Just continuing to exist aimlessly, like a wind-up doll conducting some bad facsimile of humanity, seemed like a burden with each step. And yet, I didn't want to die, didn't even want to kill myself. That cruel paradox seized me as if to tear me apart, and the same thing is occurring now: facing Ryōgi now with my sins bare before her, and still not completely embracing the death that is staring into my face, even though I know life is just a slow slide to the eventual end. My end will just be a little earlier, a little stupider, and a little more worthless than other people. It's the worthlessness that I can't seem to bear. If that's the way it's going to go, then...

"...dying by your hand would be more worthwhile, more real."

"Maybe, maybe not. The only thing I know is that you're not dying tonight. Not because of me, anyway. I don't need to take your life." Ryōgi lifts the knife away from my throat, and then puts it away. Like a cat losing interest in a toy, she gets up from the bed and walks away from me, retrieving her jacket from the coat rack as she does so. Looks like she's about to

go out somewhere. I can't stand to look at her anymore. "Tell me, Enjō. Where's home for you?" Ryōgi's voice reverts to the coldness I recognize since the first night we met.

Funny question to ask. Me and my folks kept moving, never staying for more than half a year in any one place; I assume either because of the unpaid rents, or the collection agencies would come knocking. Ever since that started happening, I've hated the setup and wanted a real, normal house. Like the one we had when I was a kid.

"A dump called unit 405 in an apartment somewhere. Why are you asking?"

"That isn't what I asked. I'm asking about the place you really want to go back to. Well, if you don't know, can't say I didn't expect it." Ryōgi opens the door leading outside, and without turning to face me, she says, "Ciao, Enjō. Come by any time you feel the need."

She goes out the door, and with a turn, she disappears from view, seemingly taking all of the color of the room with her, leaving everything with an air of dreariness. For several minutes, my rust-tainted soul looks over the room where I'd spent the last month of my life, before I decide to depart and separate myself from the dull monochrome.

# Spiral Paradox - I

Winter's finally come.

Much like how I could have used a bit more summer time than what was given to me this year, the town is also owed its debt of autumn. Even now, as I'm looking out the window of the office, the sky that hangs over the city is pregnant with snow threatening to fall. It almost feels wrong, like the order of things and seasons were manipulated, leaving little trace of the autumn that came somewhere in September and expired in November faster than one could have possibly noticed.

During that time, in October to be exact, I was dragged by a relative of mine to a driving school he ran out of town, somewhere in the boondocks in Nagano. It was like some sort of "drive camp" where you stayed for three weeks and finished the curriculum faster than most driving schools. I was kind of annoyed to have to leave this fine city for a month, but seeing as I couldn't turn down the request of a relative, and that my boss, Miss Tōko, gave her blessing for me to go, I didn't have much choice in the matter. They ran that place more like a military camp than they do a school, but after three weeks of that miserable nonsense, here I am, back in my home turf, for good I hope.

"Full name: Mikiya Kokutō," I read aloud from the driving license in my hand. It's smaller than an ATM card, and yet it has all my pertinent information written on it: my name, address, date of birth, and to top it all off, a picture of my ugly mug pasted on the front. The most innocuous but common form of ID that a person can get. "What do you make of this license, Miss Tōko?"

On a bed in the corner of the room lies Miss Tōko. As I throw the question to her, I expect no real answer, but—

"A contract," —she does answer, in her usual puzzling way. She's been laid low by a particularly nasty flu that put her temperature at 38 degrees, which is the reason for her current bed rest. Still, she seems as indomitable and alert as ever, proving that not even flu can make her sleep in working hours. That, or she's probably hungry, seeing as it's half past noon.

Despite the window being closed, a chill still runs through the room that charges the atmosphere. It might be because we're in the fourth floor, in Miss Tōko's room to be exact; a room that I've not been to many times. I've moved the chair beside the window and Miss Tōko's bed so I can better keep watch over her. I look over my recently acquired license as I contemplate the bad luck of my situation: after three weeks of driving—that is not,

by the way, necessarily fun—the only thing that waited for me back here is a silently sulking Shiki and a sick Miss Tōko. While they claim that they have improved relations in my absence, one need only hear about Shiki's complete refusal to help Miss Tōko, as well as her uttering of "Here's to hoping the flu melts your brain" right to her face as she downs a glass of water, as proof to the contrary.

The full name of that capricious individual is Shiki Ryōgi; a girl, though her manner of speech combined with her somewhat ambiguous features can make people understandably confused. The one beside me with a wet towel on her forehead is Miss Tōko Aozaki, my boss in the company I work for. However, besides Miss Tōko, I'm the only one employed in this "company," so it's a bit suspect to call it as such. She is, in simple terms, some kind of genius; and as is often the case with geniuses, is frequently lacking in good company. It seems that she has confined herself to her bed the entire day, though the fact that she is awake and not resting tells me that it's more of an excuse for her to not work than through any major fault of the flu itself, though she did curse herself for not getting her shots this year. While I'm inclined to tell her that she should go get herself to a doctor instead of lying around here, I'm practically the last person she listens to. She said to me once that mages are often obstinate people, and as a mage herself, she is probably one of the most obstinate of them all. It's precisely that sort of pride that stops her from just going to a doctor, loathe as she is to surrender herself to the care of any sort of "expert." And so I resigned myself to not being able to meet Shiki and nursing Miss Tōko back to health, at least for now.

"A contract." She repeats her half-hearted answer as she retrieves her glasses near her pillow. Her back-length red hair, regularly tied back in a ponytail, is untied today for convenience. Under normal circumstances you'd first notice her stern and even slightly ominous character, but in the current situation, I can recognize how pretty she is, almost enough for me to ascribe her as a different person. No doubt to prevent herself from falling asleep, she continues the conversation. "What that is," she points to my license, "is a sort of contract for you having learned how to drive. This whole country is upside down, nowadays. You don't study to learn anymore. You study to get the test results. And as soon as you get your results, the meaning of everything you learned just fades away. It doesn't tell you anything, except for the fact that you learned something to a certain shallow degree. It's just a contract. The reason and the result are all mixed up. It's like a paradox, isn't it?" She raises herself up from the bed and rests her back on the headboard as I respond.

"But isn't that what results are for? I mean, everyone studies for one reason or another."

"Of course the opposite is also true. It's reached such a state where the goal and the result, the act and its impetus can be flipped and switched around. Just as there are people who drive right after they have a license, so there will also be people who will obtain a license after they've already learned to drive, and so ace the test."

Miss Tōko is normally much more polite than her usual self with her glasses on, but today, possibly because of her fever, she is even more so. I've long learned to treasure such rare moments. Normally, she'd use that last sentence to point to herself—considering that I know she took the written and practical exam with little trouble or error, so much so that the instructor just glared and sniffed at her—to lord her authority. Still, I feel like it's not the same without her citing stories of her genius past, so I feel compelled to point it out for her.

"I know you were one of those who didn't even need to take lessons, weren't you, Miss Tōko? Hmm, the image of you going to one of those schools is kind of—"

—disturbing. And funny. I can't even imagine it.

Sensing the gist of the unsaid words, Miss Tōko glares at me and gives the best scowl she can manage in her condition.

"Come now, Mikiya. I was a student back then and it wouldn't have been so out of place for me to go to one. The way you swallowed your words just now, you'd think I had four ears and a tail."

She furrows her brow and closes her eyes in an apparent show of dissatisfaction. I never really thought about it before, but I suppose Miss Tōko had her teenage years too. As I think that, the image of a prim and proper student version of Miss Tōko pops unbidden into my head, and it makes me gulp, and my heart skip; I can't exactly pin down whether it's because of fear or humor.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but the image my mind is conjuring up looks like you from another dimension."

"Oh, I see how this is. Now that I'm sick, you show you're true colors, hmm?"

That forces a little chuckle on me. I'd have to do that, seeing as all the humor is usually aimed at me. I have to scale the balance of power somehow. I stand up to replace the towel on her forehead, which elicits a triggered response from her:

"I'm starving. Go. Cook."

Regrettably, the congee she had this morning is already being digested

in her stomach, leaving no food immediately at hand.

“We’ll have to order take-out. The udon with eggs from Kongetsu sound fine?”

“Aww, no. I’ve eaten that enough times to know exactly how many sips it takes before it cools down. C’mon, Mikiya, just cook something already. You’re a happy bachelor with your own place, so you should be able to whip something up right?”

I want to have a talk with whoever popularized that suspicious correlation. Regardless, I shrug my shoulders even as Miss Tōko looks on me with eyes filled with the expectation of delicious gourmet food, and I reveal to her the cruel truth.

“Well, unless you want nothing but noodles, I can’t do anything for you ma’am. At worst, it’ll be some college-staple instant stuff; at best, it’ll be simple pasta. If that’s fine with you, then hey, let me in the kitchen.” She frowns almost instantly.

“What about the congee you made this morning? That wasn’t some supermarket congee, I can tell you that much.”

“You’ll have to thank Shiki for that one. She doesn’t cook much, but she’s pretty good when it comes to Japanese food.” Miss Tōko lets out a low hum, I suppose indicating her surprise. Shiki being able to cook isn’t actually such a great surprise if you think about it. She was a spoiled brat of the Ryōgi family, who are known for their traditional...well, everything. And so Shiki’s palate must be similarly adjusted. She eats pretty much anything, but I guess it’s only because she’s learned to forgive the plebian tastes of the food that everyone aside from her makes. When she makes food, it’s on a level that she can personally call good, so it’s really just natural that she’s so well-practiced in it.

“It’s kind of surprising that Shiki would do anything for me. But I guess, considering how well she handles that knife of hers, it isn’t really out of place when she uses it for something other than stabbing.” She produces a long sigh of disappointment. “Well, since there’s nothing to be done about it, how about for now you get me those medicine bottles on top of my desk, Mikiya?”

After begrudgingly accepting that she’s not getting to freeload a meal, Miss Tōko lies back down on the bed. I approach her desk to retrieve the three medicine bottles on top of it, but something catches my eye. A photo is propped up on top of the desk, showing what I’m sure is some country that is not Japan. A cobblestone path frames the bottom of the picture, and in the background is a famous clock tower. The sky that is captured in the frame is the same sort of snow-threatening gray overcast that plagues the

city today., and below it in the center foreground, three individuals stand beside each other, two men, one woman. Both men are impossibly tall, but only one of them seems Japanese. The other exudes an air of someone at home in the place, without a single mote of unsuitability or discomfort.

The Japanese man in the photo has cruel features that, even in a photograph, command respect. His face is partially obscured, though not enough to hide his appearance, but it gives me a sense of disquiet to just look at him, as if he could leap out of the page through sheer force of presence. My chest tightens as I think in passing that he seems familiar; makes me think about that rainy night that I'll never forget—

As I edge my face closer to the picture to get a better look at him, my attention is drawn to something else. Between the Japanese man in a black coat, and the blond, blue-eyed man in a red coat stands a young girl. She sports an ebony mane that makes the Japanese man's coat look faded in comparison, and it stretches all the way below her waist. Her features tell of a peaceful, resplendent teenager, seemingly born from a cross between a hidden flower grown in darkness and a benevolent spirit's visage.

"Miss Tōko," I utter unwittingly, "what's this picture about?" I hear her rustle on the bed to turn to me, though I don't see it, still engrossed at the two clashing images in the photo.

"Oh, that? They were...old friends. I'd started to forget their faces, so I took a picture out of the old album to reminisce. That one's from when I was in London, the place that was witness to my first and only mistake." I don't fail to note that Miss Tōko's voice has changed, and a quick glance toward her confirms that her glasses aren't worn but are placed on the bedside table. Though she says it's only her personality changing, not her identity (unlike a certain other old friend I know), it really makes little difference from my point of view. Miss Tōko without glasses is, in a word, cold; with the speech, ideas, and actions to back it up. Despite working for her for months now, I've never gotten used to it once.

"Let's see, how far back was this again?" she wonders. "Must've been 'round the time my sister got into high school, so it must have been at least eight years. Always seem to have trouble calling back the faces of the guys in those photos. Guess it must be some sort of sign."

She turns away from me and lies face up into the ceiling, as if speaking the words straight into the air will make her remember them better. It's a rare sight to see her reminiscing like this, just as it is rare to see her in any sort of illness like now; that is to say that they have both never happened. The flu must really be doing a number on her.

"Wait, London? As in, 'tea and biscuits' London?" I ask, incredulous, as

I set the three medicine bottles down on her bedside table, pull the chair closer to the bed, and sit back down beside her. She pauses to pop some pills into her mouth, then lies back down face-up and continues.

"Yeah, *that* London. I'd ran away from my granddad, and though I managed to liberate a few bucks in the process, it was hardly enough for a living. For a neophyte mage such as myself, who had no resources or skill in the Art enough to make a sanctum of her own, there was really no other choice except to suck it up and get myself into the Collegium. It's sort of like a university, with all the oldness, the shabbiness, and the academic snobbishness that implies. Still, I couldn't complain. It's hidden in the British Museum, a domain beyond prying eyes that nurtured many of the archmasters of today. For me, it was also a treasure trove of unexpected wonders."

The way Miss Tōko tells it, it seems as much to remind herself of those half-remembered times as it is to tell me a story. As she talks, I notice her growing only the slightest bit paler. When I interrupt her to say that she might have taken the wrong medicine or something, she waves me away.

"Come on, Kokutō, this is a rare opportunity for you to hear about this, so let me talk a little more. Let's see...it was kind of an awkward situation for a twenty year old girl like me to study abroad, especially since the Aozaki's have a...history with the *Confederatio Magi*. I elected to study the runic Art, since I knew practically no mage was interested in it at the time and they needed researchers badly. Took me two years to decide that I'd done the best I can for their college, and another two for me to get my mitts on the original runes from the Thule Society. It was then that I finally got my own sanctum away from the *Confederatio* and their prying eyes. It was then, when I was engrossing myself in my soon-to-be life's work of making dolls, that I met him. He had an interesting background as some Taimitsu sect monk or some such, and a drive to seize knowledge and the greater mystery that surpassed even my own. He was passionate, almost zealous, like hellfire given form. For the most part, he turned people away, and misery seemed to follow him everywhere. His technique in the Art was second rate, but no one could doubt his skill in the arcana he did know. I kind of liked that guy."

Miss Tōko squints her eyes in a look of deep consternation, and she must surely be envisioning that man now. It is a glare laden with deep hatred and pity. I barely understood her rambling, though I still offer a weak "Mmhmm" so as not to make her pop a gasket in annoyance. "So you learned how to make dolls abroad?" I ask to fill the time, though I realize that it is such an out of place question it is almost unintentionally hilarious.

Miss Tōko, for her part, only nods and acknowledges it. I really don't mind listening to Miss Tōko ramble on, but it really is much worse for me if I can't understand. That's why I think maybe it's more appropriate for her to talk about this stuff with Shiki and Azaka and to leave me straight out of it, but Miss Tōko, spurred on perhaps by the heat of her fever, shifts the gears dangerously high on the conversation.

"A writer once said that 'a designer knows he has achieved perfection not when he has nothing left to add, but when he has nothing left to take away.' That's what I was trying to do when I was making dolls, Kokutō. I tried to make that perfect human, to ascend that indescribable '''. The man I told you about tried the same thing, except he used the soul instead of the flesh. He lived to solve that problem with the unobservable cat in the box, to see beyond the definite truth of the box and see the unseen soul of the '' inside. It almost resembles that 'collective unconscious' bullshit by that psychiatrist a long time ago. He thought he could reach the origin if he just followed the breadcrumbs, the little clues left for us here. We both tried to reach that origin, the infinite stream that traces out the source of all humanity. People now are so divided amongst races, and skills, and capabilities, and inheritances, that it's impossible to count the plurality of it all. So much has been added, and so much to take away, so much that we can't reach the origin of all these skills and ancestry that we like to label causality, and other people like to call fate. It's become almost like a formula you can manipulate; add this ability, add that trait, and the wonders of deterministic outcomes gives you a life from the genesis of the genetic blueprint that is so predictable to that creature of Laplace that it becomes droll, and if you want to call it fate, then so be it. We've made too much of ourselves in the never ending human imperative for omnipotence. The four bases that comprise the helix structure that composes all of humanity are so simple, yet so complex as to comprise a spiral, cumulatively accumulating unto immeasurability until we all fall into a paradox of our own creation, a paradox that can't be observed. That's why humans and mages alike will never ascend to the origin they aspire to—so I resolved to make one myself. But it was useless. In the efforts I poured blood, sweat, and tears over, I couldn't make the Platonic human, only a perfect me."

She pauses for a handful of seconds, allowing herself to breath. I perceived her rambling to be one long breath, a speech that sounded like she said it without knowledge of punctuation marks. The color flushes back to her face, due to the medicine no doubt, and yet the eyes which stare into nothingness retain their dim quality. She adds a final note.

"To think that bastard is still trying it, even now. I know he was cast out

by his mentor for daring to find the origin of a person. He is one stubborn son of a bitch to still be hopeful. One thing I hope, Kokutō, is that you never encounter that man in the photo. If that ever happens, run away. Fast." With the last ounce of her strength, Miss Tōko lies back down peacefully on the bed and closes her eyes. In an instant she is fast asleep, her chest rising and falling with each whispered breath.

That was...wow. That was some medicine, to make her ramble on like that and then sleep so contentedly. I replace the towel on her forehead one last time and leave the room as quietly as I can so as not to disturb her. I emerge from her room to the deserted office. Only the distant, keening noises of steel from the neighboring factories intrude in the solitude. While the shrill echoes crawl up my skin, I think to myself: I can't hold true to Miss Tōko's request. There is that little burrowing feeling in my mind, a minor tick that keeps saying I met that man two years ago. Though I can't be sure that man in the photograph is really the one that saved me on that night. The memory of the night, the uncertain identity of the man, and the words of Miss Tōko are still six different jigsaw puzzles that I'm trying to solve while the pieces are mixed together. The peaceful atmosphere that had permeated the room only moments ago disappears in the disquiet that breeds and multiplies in my mind and reaches down to my spine.

## Spiral Paradox - II

A day later in noontime, November 8, the weather is still disinclined to change its depressing overcast tint, and it shares this gloom with the office that has no light to stave it off. The office is actually a wide space, albeit littered with many assorted occult trinkets and knick-knacks from Miss Tōko's collection. Even given this, it's too big of an office for just Miss Tōko and me. There's enough desks for ten people to all work at the same time, and there's even a sofa for any unexpected guests. Of course, the concrete flooring is a dull, gray, undecorated thing (unless you count the scattered artifacts and books as decoration), and the walls tell much of the same story, with no wallpaper to call their own, but if we had enough employees to fill those desks then by God this would actually look like a halfway decent and productive working environment.

Sadly, today only three people fill this vacant space. Miss Tōko's desk is by the window, yet the woman herself is clearly nowhere close at hand. Through the wonders of modern medicine, Miss Tōko's flu was as good as gone when she woke up this morning, which she celebrated by going out as soon as she could throw on some clothes, leaving me to shoulder the workload. Today, the job is to order some of the materials we need for her art exhibition next month. I'm holding the list she drew up of things she needed while I sorted out my own list of people from whom I could buy the stuff on the cheap. She usually doesn't bother with the grueling detail work like this, preferring to just show up and start selling. But I suppose this is part of what she hired me for. I spent the better part of the morning with one hand on her list and another holding the phone receiver, trying to negotiate prices, and then repeating the process for the next retailer, and so on in a seemingly never-ending chain.

While I sort out the trouble and trying to decide whether I'm really busy or just painstakingly thorough, two other people are making the room their own for the moment. One of them, Shiki Ryōgi, in her unmistakable kimono, is sitting on the sofa with a look on her face that can only imply a deep, abiding boredom.

The other, a young girl in a black school uniform, sits on the chair behind the desk furthest away from me, across the length of the room. The girl wears a head of dark hair that pours all the way down to her back, and her name is Azaka Kokutō, my sister who is currently a freshman in high school. Ever since she was small, she didn't exactly have the best health, and so it was decided when she was ten years old to move her away from the city air

and to entrust her to a relative. Since that time, we've only seen each other a precious few times. In fact, if I'm right, the last time we actually met was New Year's Day of my freshman year. I remember she still had quite the childish disposition then, which is why when I first saw her this summer, I was quite surprised. I guess environment does have a role in your upbringing. She's quite fond of carrying the air of some refined, well-to-do girl, and her demeanor has changed to become fairly active, with no trace of the frailty of body that characterized her early years. When I first saw her, I actually thought she was some stranger and not my sister Azaka, which can probably be ascribed to her changing so much in stature and appearance in the span between ten and fifteen years of age.

I steal a glance at Azaka in the faraway desk. She's sitting there, and close at hand is a book propped open, thick enough that it's likely to cause a concussion when used as a blunt weapon. Her eyes dart from the book to the paper as she copies something, writing it down on a piece of paper; an exercise that Miss Tōko left behind for her to work on while she's away. While the cryptic words of Miss Tōko still hang over my mind, there is just one thing that bugs me much more at the moment.

"Mikiya, Miss Tōko has taken me in as her apprentice."

She said that a month or so ago, to which I vehemently expressed my indignation, but with her newfound stubbornness, she brushed me aside. Goddamit, I'd thought my family to be extremely normal and boring, but why does she need to be something as eccentric as a sorcerer?

"Azaka?" I decide to take a break from kissing the phone so much and call out to her. She finishes what she was copying with one last, firm stroke before she levels her eyes with mine. Though she doesn't speak, the clash of the temper in her eyes and her quiet, polite demeanor seems to prod me to continue. "I know that you're on holiday because of your school's Foundation Day, but remind me again why exactly you felt the need to travel all the way down here in Tōkyō?"

"You really should go home more often than you do, Mikiya. Maybe then we could discuss this like a reasonable family around the dinner table." She clears her throat before she continues. "The dormitories were set on fire, and that forced it to close down for repairs. They were requesting that anyone that had homes nearby to vacate the premises temporarily if possible, and so mother called me back for the time being." She replies with a calmness that reminds me of my high school student council president—and not entirely in a good way.

"Did the whole dormitory burn down?"

"Oh, no, only the east wing it seems—where the freshmen and sopho-

mores were lodged. The school hushed it all up so that it wouldn't get in the news."

Interesting. Reien Girl's Academy is known for raising the stuck-up little kids of some of the most powerful families in the country, and they certainly have the resources to keep the media in the dark about it. It would be a big blow to the school's reputation and image...especially if it's arson by a student as Azaka's words would imply—

"Dear brother, I do hope you're not over-thinking the situation?" Her eyes narrow as she stares daggers at me. Due to some unfortunate circumstances that happened over the summer, Azaka doesn't like me poking my head into any more dangerous situations. A silent, Cold War argument always ensues at this juncture of conversations between us, but I decide to dispense with it.

"Heaven forbid, Azaka; I wouldn't dream of it. But enough about that. What the heck are you doing over there anyway?"

"Nothing that has anything to do with you, I imagine."

"Oh, I think you'll find that it does. How do you think I should explain you trying to become a...what was it...sorcerer, mage...whatever you call yourselves! How well would that go over with dad, huh?"

"Oh, so you will show your face in the house after all." Damn. She's got me there. She knows that I can't go back to the house ever since the big argument between me and my folks, the little brat. "And anyway, there *is* a difference between a sorcerer and a mage, you know. You've been working for Miss Tōko for so long and you don't even know that?"

Hmm, now that she mentions it, I do remember Miss Tōko saying something similar. Like how it's better to advertise yourself as a sorcerer to neophytes because it sounds mystical and they love that, but that the two are completely different things, or something along those lines.

"Yes, I've heard her spiel once or twice before, but there can't be that great of a difference, can there? Both use that suspicious Art that Miss Tōko always talks about, I think."

"No, they don't actually. The Art is certainly a departure from consensus, but in the end, it's only doing what was already previously possible, but doing it in ways that are logically impossible. For example—" She gets up and walks to Miss Tōko's desk, retrieving a silver letter opener, a favorite of Miss Tōko's and one she uses quite often. Spotting some useless pieces of paper, she traces something on them using the letter opener. In an instant, it starts spewing some amount of smoke as it slowly burns.

I watch the entire display without saying a word. Miss Tōko had once done something similar (though on a larger scale), but I'm at a loss for

words when I see my own sister doing it. I guess I've been imagining this moment ever since she said she'd become Miss Tōko's apprentice.

"I'm sorry, but I gotta ask...is there any trick to it?"

"Of course. To someone who doesn't know, it might look amazing, but it's really nothing special if you think about it. You could do the same thing with a cheap lighter, after all. Whether it's through a lighter or your fingertips, the fact that you set fire to something doesn't change. Not so mysterious now, is it? That's what the Art essentially amounts to."

I suppose then that the Art is like a substitute for technology. But from what Azaka is saying, it's probably better to say that technology has overtaken it.

"Rain-making, for another example," she continues, "is possible with both the Art and technology. The only difference is the way they go about it, but the effort expended is almost the same. It might look like the mage is doing it instantly, but what they don't tell you is that there is still a lot of preparation. Once it might have seemed like a miracle, but now that's not the case, just like once it might have been unbelievable to reduce an entire village to ash, but now we have missiles to do the same thing. In fact, that might actually be more efficient. The Art is only doing something that you usually can't do on your own, but is still very possible, which makes it very covert. It's not miracle working. The only miracles are things that are still impossible for humanity, things that can't be done no matter how much time and money you expend. The ones that can make that impossibility possible are what we call 'sorcerers,' and what they have isn't just a simple parlor trick like the Art, but 'sorcery,' or real magic."

"Then there would have been more sorcerers than mages in the past, right? I mean, they didn't have lighters or missiles back then."

"Correct, and that terrifying capacity is why people were afraid of them. But it's different now, isn't it? The consensus has changed. There's little need for the Art, and sorcery is slowly disappearing day by day. I mean, think about it, there's little that isn't possible for humanity. That's why there are only five real sorcerers remaining." Her voice lowers in a sadness that is beyond me to understand.

The only thing I can think of that's still currently impossible to mankind is manipulating space and time, and maybe given enough time, even that will be possible, and magic just a fading memory. The way Azaka tells it, it almost seems like a boy that was once captivated by scientific wonders, then became a scientist and discovered the sheer banality of it all.

"Then here's hoping the last spell is the spell to make everyone happy." Though I say it to break the mood, the effect is somewhat lower than

anticipated as she becomes silent then looks at me like she one would look upon the village idiot, then quickly turns her face away from mine.

She chuckles a bit. "Sadly, even if that were true, Mikiya, very little actually have the capacity for sorcery now. I never wanted to be a sorcerer. Just learning the Art for my own reasons is fine for me."

"Wow, settling for something lesser isn't like you at all, Azaka."

Azaka shakes her head while emitting a vocal *tut tut*. "Let me remind you that the Art shouldn't be underestimated. And besides, the Art was once part of actual sorcery too. It's only because of human technology catching up that there is an Art in the first place. I should probably rephrase what I said earlier. It's not that I don't want to learn sorcery. It's that I can't. Mages are creatures of long, storied dynasties, starting out with some kind of scholarly past, and then passing what they learn of the greater mysteries to the next generation, which repeats in a never ending quest for ascension. As it happens, I am not a part of one of these dynasties. Miss Tōko said once that she was of her family's sixth magical generation, and that her third generation produced a magical savant, so even discounting age, she has a huge head start just because she was born into a family with a tradition. For someone like me, it's more difficult."

"Man. Rough and tumble world ahead of you, isn't it?" So it's kind of like how people with a lot of doting relatives and a truckload of inheritance money get to have the best opportunities. But—"Wait a minute. Then how'd you get to be a mage when I know for a fact that our family never dipped its toes into any sort of occult or mystical stuff?"

"Yes, that's what Miss Tōko said as well," she says, sporting a pouting look on her face. "But she also said that I'm one of the few who get it just from chance. She said I was good at igniting things, so..." her voice trails off again.

I have to wonder what the hell her "own reasons" are for learning to light stuff up. For all I know she could actually be the one who set fire to the dormitory

"Didn't you just tell me that you can't build up so much proficiency with just one generation of learning? Then why don't you just stop aiming to be a mage and try finding a real job?" Especially since today's job climate is stricter than ever, I wanted to add, but hold off on saying so as not to antagonize her further.

Azaka's mouth starts to form into an attempt at shouting the rebuttal at me, but is interrupted when the sound of a crash and a series of footsteps leap into the room.

"Oh, don't mind him going on about the economy, Azaka. You'll get

job offers before you know it. Give it two years and you might even be a museum curator!"

The crashing sound was the door opening, and the footsteps belonged to Miss Tōko, who had returned.

Miss Tōko's footsteps have such certainty of pace that you'd never know she was sick only yesterday. After taking off her coat, she heads to her desk and hangs it behind her chair, after which she takes her usual place behind the desk. Both me and Azaka see her eyebrows come close together in a frown when she looks at her desk and finds the letter opener's position on the desk has changed since she last saw it.

"Azaka, what did I tell you about relying too much on tools to channel the Art? It'll dull your skills. Or maybe you just wanted to show off in front of Kokutō here and not fail, hmm?"

A beat passes without her saying anything, and then "Yes, I'm sorry." The fact that she can still answer faithfully even while her cheeks are beating red with embarrassment is one of my favorite qualities about her.

"As for you, Kokutō, it's kind of rare for you to be talking about that kind of thing, isn't it? I thought you had no interest whatsoever in the Art?"

"What, you have my sister make kindling out of paper and think I wouldn't have some casual interest?"

"Point." Miss Tōko laughs.

"Anyway, ma'am, do you remember anything about yesterday?"

"Everything's a blank after I drank my medicine. Don't tell me I said something embarrassing now." She takes off her glasses and cocks her head in curiosity.

"Erm...no, nevermind."

"Suit yourself," she says with a shrug before producing a cigarette and a lighter from her pocket and putting them to use. She allows herself one deep puff before she continues. "Now Azaka, we need to discuss you talking about certain topics with Kokutō. Covertness and concealment are the best tools a mage has, and don't you forget it. Well, I guess I can let it slip this one time since it's Kokutō were talking about."

"I'm not sure I like how that sounds," I interject out loud.

"Oh, hush," Miss Tōko hisses while batting a hand in my direction. "I only meant that you know what to talk about depending on who you're talking to. You wouldn't talk about the Art with a normal human being, would you? See? Praise! Who would've thought, coming from me, right?"

"Thanks...I guess? Anyway, from what you're saying, it sounds like regu-

lar people knowing about the Art is bad for business.”

“It’s far more than just that. The Art sort of...loses its touch. Or let me put it another way. Do you know where the word ‘mystery’ comes from?” She leans her head forward on her desk, cradling it above her entwined hands. Her eyes imply the air of mischief that is always present when her glasses are removed.

“I’m not entirely sure, but I think it’s from Greek, right?”

“Yep. It comes from the Greek verb ‘*mūein*’, meaning ‘to close.’ It further evolved into ‘*mustērion*’, which means ‘secret rite.’ Both imply a nature of secrecy and a sort of eremitic quality. It’s an accurate reflection of a mage’s best qualities. They do this because the fact that a mystery is a mystery grants it a value and meaning. Reality deals with beliefs. Enough people believe that magic is gone, almost dead, and so it is. The fact that mages know this, and yet pursue their craft is what gives them the power to reshape reality to their will. In the most crippling paradox for mages, they cannot allow the Art to die, and yet too many mages will deaden it, make it mundane. Without the mystery and interaction of belief and disbelief, both the Art and sorcery, drawing their power from the same origin, would weaken, and the same thing will happen with all the mages in the world.”

While as usual I can’t grasp the entirety of what Miss Tōko is saying, I think I actually understand the gist of what she’s trying to say. If secrecy and concealment are their watchwords, then I can understand why she was kind of peeved at Azaka a while back for performing the Art in front of me.

“Then surely you use the Art when you’re in a place where no one can see you, right Miss Tōko?”

“Nope, not even there,” she says as she snuffs out her cigarette on the ashtray. “Well, if it’s a duel, then I probably have no choice in the matter. Still, a good mage knows how to use the Art without breaking his hands. A smart mage knows not to use the Art when there’s an easier way to do something, and there frequently is. Besides, mages are all organized about this. When the Ordo Magi was formed during the medieval age and started regulating the tutelage of the Art, they knew from the progression of science that magic itself would decay. So they hid the Art, made it even more of a secret than it already was so that only a select few could study it in their Collegium. They police any leak they discover with some stringent punishments: Collegium assassins are sent to kill you if you involve non-mages in performances of the Art, a probable source of that prevalent myth of a wizard losing his powers when revealing its nature to people. Every performance is a risk of discovery, and soon most mages learned to perform the

Art only when absolutely needed. Because the Ordo controlled many of the hallowed grounds with rich mana leylines, and monopolized much of the materials a mage needs for any serious research, the few rogues who disliked the decrees were at a significant—and self-made—disadvantage. Power of the majority for you.”

“Erm...Miss Tōko,” Azaka interjects with obvious trepidation. “Does that mean that I have to go over there to the Collegium someday?”

“Well, it’s not like you *have* to, but you’ll definitely learn faster there, I’m sure. And even then, no one’s going to stop you if you eventually want to leave mid-way. Though they may act like it many times more than most mages would like, the Ordo doesn’t control your life.”

“But then, doesn’t that sort of render their efforts at concealing the Art meaningless? I mean, any random mage could just get out and spread the word, so...” Though Azaka finishes with a noncommittal tone, Miss Tōko nods.

“That’s true. In fact, a lot of people do indeed enter with the intention of learning a few tricks and then leaving for God knows where. But like anyone’s desire to watch corny soap operas ironically, it doesn’t last long. Usually the sheer volume of *stuff* that the Collegium offers is enough to make them stay. To the serious mage, scholarly pursuit of the Art is supreme. Actually using it is a last-ditch scenario. Studying is what leads a mage to the greater mysteries, and eventually, gnosis. However, you have a distinctly different goal than most mages, Azaka, so I suspect the Collegium would just be poison for you. Still, if you’d like to take all of this a step up, the Collegium’s not going anywhere.”

Azaka exhales gratefully and lowers her gaze, which thankfully tells me that she too is not going anywhere anytime soon. Studying to be a mage is one thing, but to have her study it abroad in some kind of eccentric college is one thing I seriously wouldn’t abide.

“Question time,” says a lazy voice from the sofa. “Do the mages there keep secrets from each other too?” Shiki, who up to this point, had been content to sit quietly and stare at the scenery outside (and is, as a matter of fact, still doing so now), suddenly speaks. I’d assumed she just wasn’t interested in the topic, but far be it from me to assume what she is and isn’t interested in.

“Well...yeah,” Miss Tōko replies hesitantly. “It’s a very balkanized environment, where you don’t usually reveal what you’re up to or what you’re after until you pass it on to your successor—if then. Secrecy is in the blood, and secrets are power.”

“So you study for yourself to gain power you can’t use? You study for the

goal of...more studying? Guess I just can't understand what meaning there is in that sort of life, Tōko. I mean, it almost seems like all of these mages are working towards a net goal of a big fat zero."

For a moment, Miss Tōko can only smile bitterly at what Shiki just said. "Funny you should say that, since in a way, that's what mages are aiming for. Some call it the 'spiral of origin.' Others like the ring of 'The Akashic Records' better. That grand mass of nothingness. Whatever you want to call it, that's what they're after. It's where everything came from. And if you know where everything came from, you know everything that comes after. It's not even enough to call it ultimate knowledge. It's something higher than that. All the different disciplines and paradigms of learning the Art flow from this single, indivisible source. Whether it's astrology, alchemy, the Kabbalah, Shinsendō, or runes, all their practitioners harbor the same goal. The first fortunate souls that felt its presence dreamed of its potential. It isn't to sponsor the quest for the meaning of man's existence, because they already know it. It is to pierce the great lie of this world and find pure truth, whatever form it takes. Mages of the ideal sort cherish only themselves to live a life that will never be rewarded."

As Miss Tōko slowly relates this to us, the gaze in her amber eyes becomes more pointed, and the color flickers like the flame of old ambition. I ask a question on the only thing I could understand.

"When you say that they'll never be rewarded, that means nobody's reached this origin yet, right?"

"Some have reached it. It's the only way we know it really exists. But those who reached it never came back. They disappeared the moment they attained it. Mages think they ascended. No one can really be sure until you reach it. Because performing both the Art and sorcery means you reach out toward the origin, many mages think we have them to thank for what little of it we can do on this world, since they think that the mages who have crossed over become some sort of anchor for our Art to that side. The bad angle to this is of course, they could never have passed on what they know to anyone. The only reason ambitious mages take on apprentices or spawn descendants is, of course, to ensure that someday, their line can produce the means to get to the origin. There's no end to their ambition and to their eventual disappointment. Personally, I think it's just a fool's game now, especially now when there are mages that are happy to just get in the way of other mages' work."

Instead of sounding spiteful in her last sentence, Miss Tōko says it with a little hint of enthusiasm, and I manage to catch a dry, silent laugh from her lips, as if delighting in the fact that these nuisances exist.

"Even if one out of the current crop of mages managed to reach the spiral of origin, they'd never be able to pass it on, never be able to give us new things to learn about the Art. The entire matter is like a fish floundering on land," Miss Tōko says and shrugs in conclusion. Only Shiki seems compelled to speak out on the paradox Miss Tōko has just presented.

"Never heard of a stranger crowd than that. I have no idea why you mages still cling to that false hope even though you know it's beyond you."

"Maybe because for people who can turn steel into rubber and spew fire from their hands, they word 'impossible' isn't what gives them impetus in their lives, or they're deluded fools who just don't know when to quit. Who knows?" Miss Tōko couples it with an amused grin.

"Well, at least *you* know, so that's refreshing, at least," she says with just a hint of surprise.

An hour later the office returns to the usual peace and quiet, with everyone busy working, studying, or in Shiki's case, performing the necessary task of slacking. With the clock having just struck 3 o' clock in the afternoon, I decided to take a little break and make everyone some coffee, except for Azaka, who drinks Japanese tea. The orders Miss Tōko requested me to make are done, and so it is with happy thoughts of a secure paycheck that I sit back down behind my desk and take a sip off the mug. The sound of four people occasionally sipping and then putting the mug down on a desk punctuates the afternoon silence.

Of course, leave it to Azaka to refrain from holding the peace by asking Shiki the most unexpected of questions.

"Shiki, are you a guy?"

My cup almost slips from my fingers at the bluntness of the question. Shiki on the other hand, finishes her sip of coffee. When the cup leaves her lips, I see a face of genuine perplexity, and yet she shows no immediate inclination to respond to my fool sister. Azaka, however, only interprets that as a signal to continue. "Silence means consent, as they say, and that means that you admit you are a man, Shiki."

"Azaka!" I say sternly. Goddamit. I can't believe I'm diving headlong into this. While ignoring her is probably the best tonic for the situation, the tactlessness of the question and its delivery can't be ignored. I stand up so fast I push my chair behind me in the spur of the moment, but without any words of scolding to throw at Azaka's way, I end up sitting back down in silence. The whole act of sinking back into my chair feels vaguely like what I would imagine Napoleon felt like in the retreat from Waterloo.

"You obsess over the most useless details, don't you?" Shiki replies. Already she has acquired a sour look on her face. One hand rests on her temple in her usual manner of attempting to dispel growing anger.

"Oh? But this is important and necessary information, my dear." Just as Shiki attempts to maintain her composure, Azaka also gives back with composed placidity. With elbows resting atop the desk and the laced fingers hiding most of her face, she conjures the look of a chairman presiding over a board meeting.

"Important? I don't think it makes much difference whether I'm a man or a girl, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't concern you. Or maybe you're just trying to pick a fight with me, hmm?"

"I'd have thought that seemed obvious since we first met."

Though they're not at all looking or even seeing each other, their eyes might as well be staring each other down. While I'd certainly like to know what in the hell was "obvious," this doesn't seem like the right time to ask.

"Azaka," I interrupt them again. "While it's a mystery why you feel the need to bring this up yet another time, I will state the answer yet another time. Clearly this time, so your head full of magic can interpret it right. Shiki is a girl. That's it. The end." However, the interjection seems to antagonize her more than placate her.

"I know that, Mikiya," Azaka says briskly. "Shut up for a second."

*Well if you know then what the hell is this conversation even—*

"What I really want to know is Shiki's gender mentally or psychologically, rather than physically. I mean, her appearance makes her look like a man, but..." As Azaka allows her voice to trail off, she risks a sidelong glance toward Shiki, whose consternation continues to build to easily observable levels.

"Whatever. I am what I am, and my gender isn't going to change that. On the other hand, what are you going to do if I were a guy?"

"Oh, nothing really. Maybe set you up on a date with some of my friends from Reien."

I gulp, realizing I can do very little to stem the continual escalation of force. Their animosity toward each other started from the day they first met on the New Year when me and Shiki were still in high school. I invited Shiki back to my house for a while, and that day also happened to be the day when Azaka came home for a short winter vacation stint. It was Shiki she'd met that day, the other personality with his boisterous demeanor and rough speech (perhaps even more so than the present Shiki). It so surprised and angered Azaka that she decided to sleep the day through instead of talking to me. Though I'm not really surprised to see Azaka still

carrying that animosity some two and a half years forward, this is probably the point where she crosses some sort of line. I wouldn't even be surprised if Shiki just wanted to hit her now.

I stand up and start to say, "Azaka, give it a re—" but am cut off by Shiki rising from the sofa at the same time, and saying:

"Gee, thanks, but gotta pass on that one. Those bitches probably can't take what I've got to give, anyway." Shiki utters a final harrumph before she turns and walks towards the door and leaves the office, the sway of her indigo blue kimono and the sound of her boots echoing in the stair steps the last vestiges of her presence. I briefly entertain the thought of following, but knowing her, she'd just get angrier if I try to be diplomatic about Azaka.

Already planning my later burnt offerings for the miracle that nothing happened, I sit back down on my chair so that I can, at least for the moment, enjoy my coffee. Damn, it's cold already. Whatever. I finish it off.

"Aw man, she got away from me again. I really did want an answer, even if that meant she would've hit me. But her leaving without giving me neither is just dumb." She adds a click of her tongue to punctuate what she just said as she visibly does a stand down from battle stations by leaning back on her chair and stretching, making the entire thing look like just one fun exercise to her. I've long since learned to selectively ignore the bitch switch that turns on in Azaka's brain whenever she strikes a conversation with Shiki, but this time was such a close call I feel like a chat is in order.

"Alright, Azaka. Let's have an explanation."

"What? You and Shiki aren't making this any easier for me to figure out, you know? Or don't tell me you haven't devoted even a second of thought if Shiki is going out with you as a guy or as a girl." Though her statement is spoken clearly, I have a little difficulty interpreting what she wants to say until I see the copious amount of red blush coloring her cheeks.

"Because I think it's stupid to think about, maybe? Besides, asking a person like Shiki what their gender is when they don't want to is probably one of the most faux pas things ever. And again, for the nth time, what difference does it really make if she thinks like a guy but is, in fact, a girl?"

Azaka narrows her eyes and glares at me with clear suspicion. "So, can I take that to mean that as long as Shiki is a girl then you have no problem, right, Mikiya? Then help me out with something. Say two people fall in love with you—"

I can't help but snort, trying to hold back but gushing laughter.

"—one of whom is a man who underwent sex reassignment surgery for trans women, and the other is a woman who underwent the oppo-

site process. If they both love you wholly, madly, deeply, truly, who do you choose? The transsexual woman, or the transsexual man?"

Well, that's...difficult. The more I think about it, the more I think this is some kind of trap. Impulsively, as a straight man, I'd obviously go for the girl, but there is no such clear cut choice. The physical girl in this case has had a sex change to a man. Maybe this just goes to show how I just haven't truly grasped yet that love isn't bound by gender? My mind starts suggesting to myself that maybe I only do care about appearances after all, and slowly, I start to feel really bad about myself. Wait, I'm operating under the false assumption that having a gay relationship isn't allowed. If I let go of that, then maybe I go for the girl, who's like, actually a guy, but...oh what the hell, I give up. Wait a minute. Isn't there a paradox in the premise? Isn't this really a trick question? If you're stuck in the mindset of gay relationships not being allowed, then it's a question you can't win.

When I notice this and look up with a face of consternation at the other people in the room, Miss Tōko has a hand over her mouth, snickering and likely trying to dam the floodgates of laughter.

"Oh shit, Azaka, he's malfunctioning. I can practically hear the gears whirring and smoke coming out of his ears."

"Yes, ma'am. A little Epimenides in discourse never hurts."

"Dear god, the two of you are never boring, I swear. I do hope the entire family Kokutō are as crazy as you two." While Miss Tōko begins to laugh her ass off, Azaka looks at me with an entirely serious look on her face.

Oh, so that's what this was all about. Well, I guess it's Azaka's own trademark way of worrying about me. Now, seeing as Shiki wasn't clear at all when she and Azaka were talking, I suppose the onus falls on me to at least be clear on my stance on the subject.

"Whatever you're trying to say Azaka, I appreciate the sentiment. It's just that I truly don't care what sex Shiki may be. Hell, I don't think I'll change my mind even if she was still **Shiki**." I feign an itch on my cheek to hide my embarrassment, but Azaka seems to take what I said quite differently because she stands up from her seat in astonishment.

"Wait, you're saying that even if she was still that...creep **Shiki** personality, you'd still like her...him?"

"Mmm...yeah, guess so." Not a second after I say that, I feel the sharp impact of something quite heavy hitting my face, leaving me dazed and confused for quite a while, during which I only hear Azaka say:

"Augh, you suck!"

Then the sounds of her running, the door to the stairwell opening, then her fading footsteps again. Once everything in the world stops spinning

and returns to their correct upright position do I realize that Azaka threw that thick book she was reading at me. Azaka is gone, leaving only me and Miss Tōko, now enjoying previously unseen levels of jocularity, alone in the office as I adjust my jaw and rub the blunt force trauma inflicted on my face.

Two more hours pass after that embarrassing interlude and then it's finally time to clock out. Shiki and Azaka never returned for the day, presumably too livid at each other (or in Azaka's case, at me). As I brew the last coffee for Miss Tōko and myself before leaving, a practice which had long become part of the ritual of daily work, I consider whether or not I should pay Shiki a visit in her apartment.

"Oh, I forgot to ask you something Kokutō. Mind doing some supplemental work?" Miss Tōko calls out after taking a swig off the mug of coffee I just made for her, which significantly lowered any apartment visit chances in one swoop.

"What sort of 'supplemental work,' ma'am? Is this another case similar to the Fujin—"

"No, no, nothing like that. I say supplemental because this one's not getting earning you any extra zeroes on the check. Remember this morning I went out? See, I heard this interesting story from my cop friend. You know the Ōgawa Apartments down in Kayamihama?"

"Kayamihama's the reclaimed land that's been zoned for public and commercial high rises, right? It's supposed to be a model district for future residential plans in the city, or so I hear."

"Yeah, and a convenient thirty minute train ride from here, too. They're planning some real swank apartments there, the likes of which you wouldn't see here downtown, but what we're interested in is this apartment that I worked on for a short time back when it was under construction. Apparently at around ten last night, a white-collar stiff in her twenties was attacked in the street; probably an attempted rape. The guys doing it somehow botched it, resulting in the woman being stabbed in the abdomen and left there as the suspects ran. Without a cellphone or a single soul in sight at such a late hour, she dragged herself inside the nearest apartment complex—the Ōgawa Apartments—leaving a blood trail as she went. But the Ōgawa Apartments don't house any residents on the first or second floor, so she had to make her way up to the third floor before anyone could hear her calls for help. She managed to operate an elevator to go up the third floor, but I guess she couldn't move anymore. She kept

calling for help but nobody in the units paid her any attention, and she expired around eleven o' clock."

Damn. Guess that's what happens when apartments and condos get bigger and the walls get thicker that you don't talk to the neighbors anymore. Maybe you can't even hear anything outside, even dying screams. Indifference becomes the nature of politeness. Reminds me of a story I heard recently from a friend, when every single resident from a floor up heard screams getting louder and louder from a unit a floor down. No one knocked to investigate, and in the morning they just found out that the parents killed their own kid. When the police asked them, the people said they all heard it but thought it was some kind of a joke.

"Here's where the problem starts," continues Miss Tōko. "That woman was shouting so loud even the people in the next building over were hearing her. It wasn't even just screams, she was apparently really shouting 'help!' The people in the neighboring apartments ignored it because they thought the people in the Ōgawa Apartments would help her out considering her spirited appeal."

"Wait, you don't mean—"

"Yep, the people in the Ōgawa building swore they never heard a single soul. I'd pass on this one if it was the first time, but my cop friend told me this is strike two. They had apparently had another similar incident, but I couldn't check it out. Regardless, something is definitely up there, and my detective friend consulted me about it, so here I am."

"So what do you want me to do, ma'am? Investigate the place?"

"No, no, we'll case the place together at some point. For now, I want you to see what you can do about pulling up a list of residents from the Housing Bureau, previous addresses, employment, stuff like that. Again, it isn't adding any zeroes on your paycheck, so you can take it slow on this one, but I'd like it at least by December."

"No problem, ma'am," I reply, voice brimming with confidence. Yet I can't shake the feeling, despite Miss Tōko's earlier waving off of the comparison, that this is going to be another weird case like the Fujino Asagami one. I take a drink from the bitter coffee, the mug now nearing empty.

"Anyway, to change the subject...Kokutō?"

"Hmm?"

"You really don't care if Shiki was a boy or girl?"

Fortunately, my well-rehearsed image of office composure holds in front of Miss Tōko, because if Gakuto asked me that question, I would've been compelled to spit the coffee in his face.

"I like Shiki, but if I'm allowed to have my way, I guess I prefer her as a

girl."

"Oh, well no problem then," she says disappointedly and shrugs.

"I think I need clarification on what exactly that means, Miss Tōko."

"I mean that she's definitely a girl, physically and mentally. **Shiki** is long gone, so technically speaking, there shouldn't be any male personality in her anymore."

I don't know if I really agree with Miss Tōko since Shiki's way of speaking is still quite masculine. *Shiki* two years ago before the coma never spoke like that.

"See, you can compare Shiki to the *Taijitu* symbol," she continues. "We all recognize it: a big circle, white on one half, black on the other, as if each side is trying to consume the other one. And inside each color, we find a small point that is the opposite color, a black point in the white, and a white point in the black. It's a symbol that swirls and dances in conflict—a spiral of black and white."

"A spiral...of conflict?" My head throbs a beat. I feel like I've—

"Yes. Yin and yang, light and darkness, right and wrong, man and woman. The original reference is to the Chinese cosmology of there once being one, but from the one comes two. In *onmyōdō*, the Japanese practice of divination, this essential divide is known as *ryōgi*, 'the pair of extremes.'"

"*Ryōgi*? But isn't that—"

"Yep, Shiki's surname. Her life with a dual personality was long ago decided for her. Does she have it because she was born in the Ryōgi dynasty, or because the dynasty long awaited the day she would be born, the fruit of their decades of efforts? I'm guessing the latter. The Ryōgi, like the Asakami and the Fujō, are just one of the old dynasties bent on creating an ascendant being by passing on their lineage, long tampered by magic and ritual. They see ascension as their birthright, but their method is decidedly less scholarly. Among them, the Ryōgi dynasty is particularly interesting. They knew that having psionic abilities or the second sight and other supernatural abilities would make them stand out too much in the modern world, so they deliberately developed one that is hidden behind a façade of normality. Say, Kokutō, do you know the reason we have specialists in the world?"

Taken aback by the sudden shift of topic into the question, I become unable to answer. To be completely honest, I think my brain has suffered enough for today, and the amount of information in my head is about to overload. Still, I'd heard a little about Shiki's family before, but today was the only time Miss Tōko made mention of its similarity with others, some of which we've had a run in with in the past.

"That's because an expert, any true specialist, dedicates his mind for the complete and utter mastery of only one discipline. You pick the one mountain, and climb it until you can't climb no more. You make it your bitch. The Ryōgi dynasty understands this, and so they found a way to put any number of minds in one body. Like computers installed with various software, they are enabled to excel in many, varied things. That's why her name is Shiki. The same 'shiki' in '*shikigami*', the goetic theurgy. The same 'shiki' in '*sūshiki*', meaning 'ritual.' It results in people who, on a whim, can transcend their notions of morality, their knowledge and skills. Empty dolls waiting to be filled."

I didn't like how Miss Tōko summed it up in her last sentence. It seems to me a disservice to the person that Shiki is. Still, Shiki knew, and still knows all of this. The constant shadow of her unnatural childhood and rearing in a suspicious dynasty is probably the reason why she doesn't allow herself to grow too close to anyone.

"It was Chinese philosopher Fu Xi from whom the idea that from the primordial chaos of emptiness, the *ryōgi*, the pair of extremes, is formed. And from the *ryōgi* come the *shishō*, the four phenomenon, and from that, the *hakke*, or the eight trigrams. This might be another way to illustrate what Shiki was meant to be. She's trying to let go of her past, despite seemingly being called back to it time and again." Miss Tōko lights her nth cigarette for the day with the flash of a lighter's flame, then points the cigarette at me. "It's you who broke her, really. Crazy people don't think they're crazy by their own. They need another person. It was you, inadvertently or not, that made Shiki think unnaturally of her own existence two years ago."

She thrusts an unlit cigarette toward me. I don't smoke, but I take it anyway and let it kiss the flames of Miss Tōko's offered lighter, and put it to my lips. Recently lit cigarettes always have a curious and mysterious taste to them.

"Man, I didn't even want to talk about the *ryōgi* anyway, but look where we always end up, huh? All this exposition might mean you die tomorrow, Kokutō." Miss Tōko says with a warm smile.

"Don't worry. I'm looking both ways when I cross the road tomorrow, all so I can spend another day working my ass off for you, ma'am."

"Good to hear. Anyway, remember those two little opposite color points in the *Taijitu*? White on black, black on white? All that says about gender really is that we all carry a little of the opposite sex inside us. Just because Shiki speaks more masculine doesn't mean she's more yang than yin. We all have a little bit of each other. Shiki is female. Her masculine way of talking is, I think, just a way to compensate for the **Shiki** who died. You getting

it? She at least wants you to remember him. Heh, she can still be cute in her own way."

Somehow, I understand. She might talk like a guy, but she never acted as much like a guy as the **Shiki** two years before. She's still pretty shaken up by the loss of him, and she never really fully recovered from it. She might put up a good front of it, and other people might be fooled, but I don't make the same mistake. She's still wracked with a guilt and loneliness that's eating her inside out. The vulnerability I sensed about her has changed very little since our high school years.

I haven't changed much either. I still can't leave her alone. And it's been two and a half years since she was last so close to asking it, but when the time comes, I'll save her from that life.

## Spiral Paradox - III

The next day I wake up in the morning to a clock screaming nine o' clock in my face.

Jesus Christ, I am so fucking late.

I rush to the office, carrying a package much too heavy with me in a bag shaped like the container to a bamboo sword, to find that Miss Tōko and Shiki are already in and expecting me.

"Sorry I'm late, everybody." I set the package to stand against the wall and pause to catch my breath, inhaling deeply like I just ran in a marathon. While I reckon the length of the bag to not even exceed a meter, something heavy is definitely inside it, something steel maybe. When I got out of the house, it only took 100 meters for it to turn my arm numb. As I'm rubbing my smarting shoulders (both of them, since I had to keep changing) and stretching my tired arm muscles, Shiki approaches me.

"Hey, 'morning, Shiki. Nice weather today, isn't it?"

"Mmhmm. They say it's going to be like this for a while, so I suggest you get some exercise in while you can." Shiki just wouldn't be Shiki unless she got her morning rudeness out of the way. She's dressed in a very fancy looking white kimono, which contrasts quite vividly with her red jacket, or it would if it wasn't on the sofa, looking like it was thrown there with abandon. Her *obi* today is patterned, in contrast to her usual taste. Designs of falling leaves decorate the sash, and even the edges of her sleeves are adorned with little designs of *mitsuba* and red autumn leaves. "Mikiya, who owns that?"

Her white finger points to the bag rested against the wall.

"Oh, that? Something Akitaka was supposed to give you. You were out last night when I visited you, and who could it be waiting at the door but Akitaka? We caught up on things for an hour, but when it looked like you weren't coming back for a while, we decided to leave. It was then that he entrusted me to give you that. I think he said it was a Kanesada or something?"

"Kanesada?" Shiki burst out suddenly. "As in the swordsmith-that-inscribes-the-Kuji-on-his-swords Kanesada?" Her face is positively beaming as she immediately approaches the bag and retrieves it with one hand with little difficulty. She begins to pull the string to open it, doing it gingerly as if she was peeling open a banana. It isn't long before she strips the upper part of the cloth, revealing a long, thin piece of seemingly years old steel. We can only see maybe ten percent of the entire thing, but now there is

little wonder as to why it made my arm numb just carrying it around. This piece of metal, about two rulers or longer in length, is further wrapped by cotton cloth, and from what we can see, two holes are set towards the end. It also looks like there are some characters carved in the surface of the steel, but I can't see them from where I am.

"What in holy hell was Akitaka doing with this?" I've never seen her sound this happy or awestruck. She can barely even contain the look of delight on her face. It's kind of weird and not altogether disturbing to see her unabashedly enjoying herself with this and not the little random things in everyday life.

"What is that, Shiki?" She turns around when I ask the question to reveal the biggest grin I've ever seen on her face.

"Wanna see? It's a blade the likes of which you'll rarely see these days," she says as she begins to extract the blade completely from the bag, but Miss Tōko stops her.

"Shiki, I know that's an old piece of history. Don't even think of pulling that out unless you want to cut down the ward around this place." Shiki freezes as soon as she says that. "It's impressive and all, and I can even read the Kuji: 'let the warrior-god light my way.' It's cool. But the wards that I've put up won't be a match for a sword with that kind of history."

With Miss Tōko's words that seemed like they were warning of some great tragedy if we disobey her, Shiki has little choice except to put the blade away again.

"Eh, fuck it. I don't think Mikiya's all that interested in swords anyway. I mean, it doesn't even have a hilt yet. Akitaka and the others in that house must all be getting senile if they even forgot about that." Much of the blunders of Akitaka can mostly be attributed to his age, which has only recently passed thirty. If anything, he has a lot to grow into. Still, he's been helping Shiki ever since she was only ten years old, so I don't think it's particularly fair of her to call him senile.

Shiki parts with the blade as if she's parting with a good friend, feeling the two holes near its end fondly. Only upon later research do I find out that the holes are for fitting the hilt in later. It looks remarkably well preserved, maybe coming from the 16th or even 12th century. If so, it could qualify for an important cultural property, but something tells me Shiki has no intention of handing it over to a museum.

"Old swords build up their own mystery and belief around their ancient history, and so become weapons capable of even cutting spells shaped from the Art," explains Miss Tōko. "So don't take that thing out again. I won't be responsible for any eldritch horrors you may unleash spiriting you

away." After she says this, she breathes with a sigh of relief. "So, Kokutō, let's hear your reason for being late."

"Oh, sorry about that. I was busy looking up the stuff you requested last night. Still I have the names of the residents of Ōgawa Apartments, as well as some other information you might be interested in." The recent spread of public spread of the Internet makes investigating things even easier these days. I got totally into it last night, and before I knew it, it was the break of dawn. All I needed to do was search, supplement it with some things I asked from cousin Daisuke, and I got whole load of information without even needing to head down to the Housing Bureau.

"I told you that you could do it in December, didn't I? Someone's eager to start. Well, let's hear it."

"Of course. The Ōgawa Apartment building is unique even among all the high rises in Kayamihama. You can take a look at the weird design blueprint yourself later. Construction took place from 1997 to 1998, and three parties managed the process. You, Miss Tōko, handled the east lobby. I have the list of the construction workers on the building, as well as the construction timeline, if you need them."

From my bag, I produce the thick stack of print-outs I made for her and lay them out atop Miss Tōko's desk. For some reason, her eyes are darting over each stack with a look of stress.

"The building's weirdness actually comes from it actually being two buildings combined and connected with each other. If you look at the blueprints, it'll make sense. It's two half-circle, ten-story buildings facing away from each other, and looking at it from the air, you'll see they form a full, seemingly unbroken circle. At first it was supposed to be some kind of company dormitory, and the first and second floors were supposed to be recreational and relaxation facilities. Due to the recent recession, however, they've been tightening their belts and stopped operation of those. Discounting the first and second floor, each floor of each building has five units, making for ten units each floor. Each unit is designed similarly, with three rooms, a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen, and the architectural design is mixed Japanese and Western design. The water piping and plumbing is sort of built clumsily, so they'll probably have a leak in the lower floors in the next ten years, if not already. There's a parking space outside that's good for forty cars, and another underground parking lot for another forty. More than enough for the number of present residents. When the original people who owned it fell into hard times, the entire thing was bought by a new guy. It was his plan to turn it into a residential high rise instead of a company dormitory only this year. They were adver-

tising up until March, but they only managed to fill up a little over than half of capacity. The west wing is due for a renovation at some point. Here, the blueprint.”

I place more documents on top of the desk, to which she blinks once, twice, before the frown on her face worsens.

“The buildings are separated into an east and west building, but the lobby on the first floor is normal. And there’s only one elevator. It’s a surprisingly faulty piece of equipment for such a big building. Guess we know where the budget *didn’t* go. According to reports, it didn’t even work until May. As for the rooms, the order goes from the six o’ clock position going counter-clockwise, room 01-05 in the east building, then 06-10 in the west building. There’s roof access but it’s off-limits. Third floor residents from room-to-room are: Sonoda, vacant, Watanabe, vacant, Itsuki, Takemoto, vacant, Haimon, vacant, Tōenji. Fourth floor: vacant, vacant, Sasaya, Mochizuki, Shintani, vacant, vacant, Tsujinomiya, Kamiyama, Enjō. Fifth floor: Narushima, Tennōji, vacant, vacant, Shirazumi, Naitō, Kusumoto, vacant, vacant, Inugami. Sixth floor: —”

“Alright, enough already,” Miss Tōko declares, raising her hands as if in surrender and perhaps a little bit of exasperation. “Man, you go all out when I let you go freestyle. You probably have what hand the residents use to pick their noses or something in there.” She motions a hand to give her the list, and I hand it over to her. “I mean, it wouldn’t really surprise me if it did.”

“Thanks. I was getting tired of reading it anyway.” As soon as she casts her eyes on the list in her hands, she gives a long whistle, a rare exclamation of impressed surprise.

“Look at this. It has their immediate family, place of employment, previous residence. Jesus, Kokutō, if you ever became a detective, everyone would line up to get your ass into asset forfeiture.”

“Nah, the guys there do far better than me regularly. I mean, I haven’t even checked half of the families yet.” I was supposed to, but sleep demands got the better of me. In the end, I could only check thirty out of the total fifty residents of the Ōgawa Apartments with any detail. The remaining twenty I only have names and their immediate family tree.

Miss Tōko quietly reads the list I gave her, but since the middle of reading the list of names, she’s been looking at the list with a grim face buried in reflection. Finally, when her glare can no longer contain itself, she speaks.

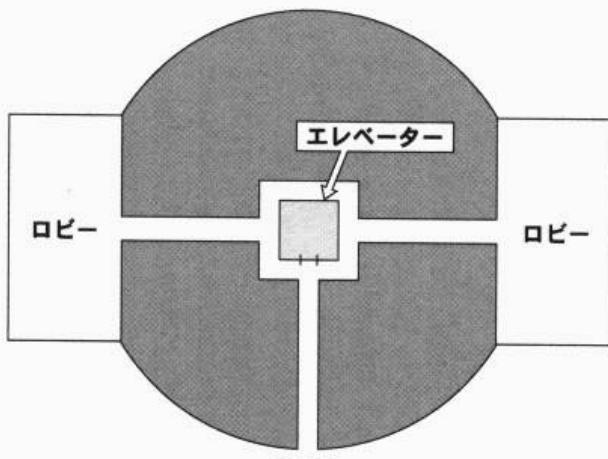
“Tōko, lemme see that list for sec, will you?” She gets up from the sofa and walks behind Miss Tōko, sneaking a look at the list over her shoulder. “Thought so. No one else has a name that rare.” She clicks her tongue, in

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approval or annoyance I can't say. "Sorry folks, but I gotta head in early today. Got any wheels I can use, Tōko?"

"I guess there's the 200cc motorcycle in the garage."

"Riding a bike with a kimono. Right. That's comfortable."

"Well, if you aren't too picky, I have clothes in the locker. They're a bit big for your size, but they're probably better than damaging that valuable kimono of yours. Don't take the Harley out. I haven't taken the sidecar off it yet." Shiki nods in assent before grabbing her leather jacket and making off with the bag with the sword blade inside. The sound her kimono makes as she leaves is like an ominous snake. I don't like it.

"Shiki!" In the height of my disquiet, I call out to her. She turns her head back toward me, looking for all the world like she just remembered a prank that is about to be played on her.

"What is it, Mikiya? Don't tell me there's a bad stain on my kimono?" She says it with all the weight of someone just going to do a bit of shopping. Why did I call out to her? What am I supposed to say?

"Er, nothing. I'll drop by in the evening, and we can talk about stuff then."

"Um...okaayyy. Wait—evening, right? Sure, I'll be there. See ya later." She waves a hand in a short goodbye before she closes the door to the office entirely.

It has been one hour since the rare event of Shiki borrowing Miss Tōko's motorcycle, and me and Miss Tōko decide to pay a visit to the Ōgawa Apartment buildings to see for ourselves. It's thirty minutes toward Kayamihama, and it doesn't take us long before her beloved Morris Minor 1000 car is cruising down the coastal bay road, giving us a good clear view of the west coast and the harbor with its loading bays. Kayamihama itself can already be seen from here, with its high rises set against the backdrop of even taller buildings further inland. The scenery of buildings going up and down is almost graphically 8-bit in its solidity.

The apartment complex we're looking for lies smack in the middle of Kayamihama, a circular building to stand apart from the square and rectangles of the area; visible from far away but it takes quite some time to get to. Finally we arrive, and it looks even bigger up close than it is from afar.

Its ten floors make it unusually tall compared to everything else where it shares the reclaimed land, and a brick fence to dissuade intruders surrounds the grounds. A long, thin path extends from the parking lot to the entrance, all the way inside to the lobby, making it look like some bizarre Taj Mahal.

"Huh, can't seem to find the underground parking. Oh well," says Miss Tōko dismissively. Having no intention of paying the parking fee, she instead parks her quaint old car well outside the apartment grounds. "Let's go," she announces before lighting a cigarette and starting to walk. As soon as I get out of the car and step onto the ground, a slight dizziness takes over me, but it's nothing I can't handle. Probably the sun today. I walk a little behind Miss Tōko, and I sneak a look up at the roof of the building, only increasing my sense of vertigo. I quickly catch up to her, and we enter the lobby together.

One step inside, and I feel my stomach start to churn. The walls, all a cream color, are maintained with the same immaculate, clinical cleanliness as the floor. It's all very impressive. And yet, I get an overwhelming unease that threatens to spill into outright disgust at it. A bad premonition that tries to override my mind. The inside of the building is warm like a person's breath, in stark contrast to cold air outside. The heat coils and warps around my skin in a way that makes me think of the claustrophobia of a womb.

"Just your imagination playing tricks, Kokutō," whispers Miss Tōko close to my ear, and somehow it stops the dizziness. With much better faculty for thinking now, I give the building another look over. The lobby in the middle seems to be the only thing connecting the two buildings, which will become even more noticeable in floors above the second, as it becomes the only way to transition between the east and west building. We can't seem to find a manager's or caretaker's office here in the fourth floor.

In the middle of all this stands a tall pillar that runs through the center-line of the building; it's spine. Within this hollow pillar is the elevator, and winding around the elevator chasm is the spiraling staircase. Having the entire thing encased in a single structure repeats the same feeling of claustrophobia earlier.

"Not the most pleasant of buildings, this one," I comment.

"Reminds me of that Jack Nicholson movie in the hotel. There's just something really wrong about it, isn't there? It isn't a particularly unique thing though. All the little things that go into a building's architecture can be deliberately designed to toy with your mind. Everything from the color of the walls, to the location and style of the stairs. Change these around in little, but noticeable increments, and it's enough to drive the ones who pass through it every day to go mad as their pattern recognition goes crazy." Miss Tōko approaches and enters the waiting elevator, and I follow her. "Which floor, good sir?" she says in good humor.

"Hmm, maybe we could start with the fourth floor."

"All right. Up we go," says Miss Tōko as she allows her eyes to wander and look over the structure of the elevator. Even the elevator carriage is circular, twisting inside the spine of the entire structure. Since she seems disinclined to push the button herself, I find the "4" among the buttons labeled "B" to "10" and push it.

Immediately, the elevator springs to life, and I can feel its movement through the building; I can even hear it produce a relatively loud, artificial sound, maybe a clue as to how decrepit the entire mechanism is. The sound combined with the elevator's circular shape make me feel as if I'm descending instead of ascending. Before long, the elevator's door opens again to admit us to the fourth floor lobby. The first thing we see in front of us is the corridor that leads to the east building, corresponding with the apartment's south-facing entrance, just as the blueprint had indicated.

"Follow that corridor and it'll lead you to 401-405," I observe. "Keep going and you'll eventually reach a dead-end confronting the west building's outer walls."

"And you get to the west building only by coming back here and going on the opposite corridor behind the elevator right?" Miss Tōko asks.

"Yeah. It's a weird layout. They should have just connected the corridors for convenience."

"They probably wanted some unique flavor. I don't know. Uniqueness always takes a backseat to practicality for me. But I guess how you waste cash is what distinguishes one rich person from the next." She sighs then turns to me, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "So, Kokutō, what reason did you have for picking the fourth floor? Going to pay a visit to the family that supposedly died?" Her surprising query echoes all along the cream colored walls of the lobby, reflecting off the clean walls and floor like the light above. It's a room where the time of day becomes unclear, as I sense it changes little in night or day. It is only now that I notice that we never met anyone ever since we stepped inside, and were it not for the lights and the general feel of a maintained space, you'd never know anyone lived here.

"Ma'am, where did you hear—"

"I told you I have a detective friend, didn't I? Some burglar came in and everyone was already dead, right? I wasn't able to catch the name, but I knew you were going to go see it for yourself." Well, she's right. It's the reason I woke my cousin Daisuke up in the middle of the night last night, after all. "So, you going or what?"

"Well, that's what I was planning, but now that we're here..." I'm kinda scared. Before I came here, I thought the entire thing might even be kind of fun, but now even being here is an uncomfortable experience I'd rather

not go through, which only adds to the strength of the butterflies fluttering in my stomach. And yes, I am well aware of the fact that it is broad daylight.

“Now’s the time to go if you’re going, Kokutō. As for me, I want to try using the elevator by myself. Let’s meet later in the floor above this one. Use the stairs. And oh, it might be better to close your eyes as you go. See you later.” I watch her until she gets on the elevator and closes, the lights above the entryway going all the way up to the tenth floor, blinking as they go. I watch it in a daze, unsure exactly what I should be doing, and I realize I’m all alone in the lobby. Now, even my breathing is accentuated by the oppressive silence in the room where time no longer seems to exist; a vacuum world adrift in space in a unique flavour of mixed claustrophobia and agoraphobia. I never knew a building could feel this separated from the outside world.

“Man, she really isn’t coming down, is she?” I utter as I continue to watch the lights in hopes that she could return in short order. Talking to myself usually cures me of any temporary fear, but this time it has the opposite effect. As my own voice reverberates in the lobby, it returns to my ears with a tone that is practically not mine, only enhancing my unease.

Alright, enough of this. This won’t resolve itself as long as I’m here. I steel myself and start walking towards and through the corridor that connects to the east building. As soon as I go through the corridor, the disquiet that engulfed me in the lobby slips away so suddenly it’s surprising, only to be replaced by total disinterest. The corridor that runs outside the units opens to the outside, but only to a completely uninteresting view of similar looking apartments. I still stare at them as I walk along the length of the hallway, all the way to the end until I reach room 405.

It was the night on the ninth. A burglar broke into this place and supposedly reported seeing a number of bodies. He returned with a police patrolman on the same night once he reported it, but when they visited again, they only saw a family in the middle of dinner, which only made the burglar crazier. Maybe he was hallucinating. Maybe the entire family were doing some sort of collective play, and it was all just some sort of big misunderstanding. Won’t find out till I ring this doorbell, so I do.

It produces the traditional, happy, two-tone sound. After a short while, the room opens with a creaking sound. The first thing I see is how dark it is inside. The second thing I see is someone’s arm. Then his head.

“Yes? Enjō residence. Who is it?” Standing in the doorway is a middle aged man, looking and talking as irately as anyone who gets an unexpected visitor in the middle of the day.

And so it turns out that the false alarm really was just a false alarm after all. Nothing seemed to be wrong with that Enjō family in room 405.

I return to the lobby to find that the lights atop the elevator still linger on the tenth floor. I could call it down to go up, but I can already see her finding it out and calling me too much of a scaredy cat for using the elevator instead of the stairs like she said, and so without further delay I start climbing the stairs beside it. The stairs is a spiral entwining itself around the height of the elevator chasm going upwards and ever upwards, lit by dim red lights. Though the lobby air is still cold and dead, the normality of the Enjō family gives me back some much needed backbone. And yet I can't stop myself from thinking that the red lighting giving the cream walls much of their sinister air feels like a quivering torch flame lighting the way in an otherwise dark castle. Little nooks and corners of the stairwell it's supposed to illuminate remain in the dark, and every ascending step proves to be a little gloomier each time.

I fight my imagination, which seems intent on placing some sort of feral creature at the head of the stairs, escape the melancholic feel of the stairwell and finally reach the lobby of the fifth floor...which looks exactly like the lobby of the fourth floor. I know it's an apartment complex probably made with prefab materials and uninspired architectural design like a department store, but still, the sameness gets me somewhat down.

"There you are. Now let's take a trip down, shall we?" From inside the lobby comes the voice of Miss Tōko. Without saying another word, she hops inside the already waiting elevator. I follow her, seeing her stand in front of the navigation panel of the elevator, waiting for me to get in. As I do so, she speaks without turning around. "Pop quiz, hotshot. If you'd look at the floor for a second..."

"Huh? Oh, okay. I just need to look at the floor, right?" The elevator door closes with little sound to herald it. In contrast, I hear the sound of the elevator mechanism operating loud and clear. It doesn't even take four seconds to get to the destination floor that Miss Tōko punched in. The small, claustrophobic box called the elevator stops somewhere in the larger, claustrophobic space called the Ōgawa Apartments.

"Here's the million-dollar question: what floor do you suppose we're on?" I raise my face to look when she asks. The elevator door is open, and I see the lobby, or at least a lobby. It looks precisely the same as the other floor I was just on, except for one thing: a plastic plaque stuck to a side of the wall with the number "5" on it.

"Wait a minute. Fifth floor?" I'm sure the elevator moved. I heard it and

everything. That makes me the one in error. I think on it for a moment only for the obvious answer to come drifting into my mind not a moment later. “We were just on the sixth floor, weren’t we?”

“Ding ding. You thought you went up one floor but instead went up two. Those kinds of stairs make it pretty easy to do if the designer really wants to. Apartments and condo buildings are strange like that. The only way you can know what floor you’re even on is through the sign on the lobby. Take off the numbers in an elevator and have someone ride it to the top of a really tall building. Do they know what floor they’re on? Don’t think so. Switch around the floor labels on the switches and it’ll be even worse, at least for someone not used to riding it every day. Hmm, now I’ve got the urge to try it in another apartment building. Like, we sneak in at night and change stuff around.”

Crazy, but just like her. With that, she closes the elevator door, presses the button marked “1”, and before long we’re getting off the elevator back in the floor where we started.

“Oh wait, why don’t we drop by and check out the east lobby for a minute?” Miss Tōko suggests. “Both wings have a lobby on this floor, right?”

“Er, yes. It actually takes up the second floor too, with the space. It’s like a big hotel receiving—wait a minute, weren’t you the one that designed the east lobby?”

“Did I now?” she says in a voice which I can’t distinguish from sarcasm and genuine wonderment before she smiles knowingly at me. The central chamber which contains the elevator is connected to lobbies on either side with a corridor, and Miss Tōko is already starting to walk towards the one that connects to the east lobby. I follow her, and it isn’t long before we arrive. It’s a spacious room, with little of interest in it besides a stairs straight ahead of us that connects it to the second floor catwalk that lines the walls of the room. The state of seemingly perpetual tidiness with which it is kept reminds me of the look of an old Napoleonic ballroom, except dead and empty. The marble floors and the same cream-colored walls that decorate all of the walls we have yet seen in this building certainly complete the image.

“Guess I’ll set up here,” I hear Miss Tōko murmur to herself. “Perfect place for an emergency spell—” beyond that, her voice lowers to the point that I can no longer hear it. I watch as she takes a knee on the marble floor and let her hands wander on its surface like an archaeologist looking for any lost fossils.

“Um, what are you doing over there, ma’am?”

“Just a little something for later. By the way, did you notice anything

weird when you were going up the stairs? There were signs that it moved, weren't there?"

The stairs...moved? But, it's inside a solid column, which means, what? That moves too?

"I didn't say that the entire column moved. Just the stairs. You would have found the scratch marks if you looked at the corners where the stairs met the wall. Or were you really so scared as to not have your wits about you?" she asks as she continues her strange inspection of the floor.

I hate to say it, but she's right. But it was so dark that I couldn't see the entirety of the stairs, anyway, so I don't think it would have done much good even if I *was* paying attention. "But that's impossible ma'am. Moving that column implies that you'd need nothing short of tearing the entire building down to do it."

"Listen to me when I'm talking, will you? I *did* say it was only the stairs that moved. The entire thing is like a pop-a-point pencil."

"What the heck is a pop-a-point pencil?" As soon as I state this, her hands stop their questing movement and she stands up with a surprising agility.

"Wait a minute. You don't know what a pop-a-point pencil is? What kind of parents brought you up, Kokutō? It's that pencil where there are a lot of sharpened points in cartridges inside. When your lead becomes dull, you take it out and push it in the back like a bazooka, and out comes a new sharpened point without the need for cranking the handle on the classroom sharpener. Maybe they don't sell it nowadays."

I have no idea what she's describing, but I guess I understand the mechanics of it well enough.

"So you're saying that the stairs are being pushed up from below, like a piston mechanism?"

"That's the idea. They probably left half a floor's height on the thing, just to move the spiral. North becomes south and south becomes north. Something's definitely up with it. But we'll leave it for now." She walks again, this time going out the door to the outside, and I follow her lead. As we finally exit the building, she whispers something to herself, something which I can only barely hear.

"Man, you really don't know what a pop-a-point pencil is? And they were pretty popular when I was a kid too."

As if life truly wanted to deliver one last sucker punch to our efforts for the day, we arrive at Miss Tōko's parked car only to find a parking violation

ticket stuck to the windshield, for parking in a public thoroughfare. I guess we should have expected it, seeing as the road in front of the apartment was wide, and we were the only ones parked. Guess the traffic cops had nothing better to do.

## Spiral Paradox - IV

That night, after finishing up the last of the research I had to do for Miss Tōko, I headed on over to Shiki's house to hang out. It is just past 8pm on the night of November 9, and I find her absent from her home, which by itself, isn't a really out of place event.

Except on the next day, I find she still has not come back.

# Spiral Paradox - V

Unwittingly, before either my mind or my body could actually notice, my feet have already brought me to Ryōgi's house. As I step in, I notice that it has not changed its dreariness ever since the last time I set foot in here, the day when I admitted to Ryōgi that I killed my parents. Just before I close the door, I see the sky already darkened, though still somewhat lighted by the faraway setting sun. The hour hand on Ryōgi's bedside clock points to six, and as always, in this quiet space, the incessant ticking of the second hand eventually grows to become an annoyance, and only serves to exacerbate my growing headache.

It's already been nine days since I last saw Ryōgi. In that span, I've spent my time roaming the streets among the hobos and corner boys, all greeting the turn of the months to November with a silent vigil as they go about their duties. I barely ate, only pausing to look at the occasional newspaper or TV display for any news on the discoveries of my parents' bodies. Perhaps because of the depths to which my life has suddenly sunk, I've had a headache that hasn't stopped, and in fact continues to reach a new high every day. On top of that, my body has been steadily weakening, and all the joints in my body have become heavier every time I wake up from a supposedly restive night's sleep.

"What in the hell am I doing to myself?" I whisper to no one as I hug my knees close to me. I was never supposed to come back here. But now, Ryōgi's voice is the one thing I want to hear. I'm scared, and I need someone, anyone's help, and so I unconsciously brought myself here. As I wait in what seems like hours in the darkness of the unlit room, my teeth start chattering lightly, adding to the droning repetition of the ticking clock. It makes me not notice there is anyone in the room until suddenly the entirety of my sight is bathed in light. It's Ryōgi, who had opened the door without my noticing.

"Enjō? What were you...never mind. I don't think I really want to know what you like to do alone in the middle of the dark," says the voice of the girl clad in a red jacket over a white kimono. She doesn't even sound like she's surprised at my being here. Nothing about her has changed: from the hair with its tip at her shoulders, to her deep, dark eyes, to the tone of her voice. It's still the Ryōgi that I know. "Still, you couldn't have come at a better time."

She approaches her bed and places the long bag she's holding on top of it. Then she opens the door to the room she never used or opened while I

was here, and from it produces a wooden box of about the same length as the bag on her bed.

"Sorry, but whatever you gotta say, it's gonna have to wait until I finish. I just can't wait to put this bad boy together." She unties the knot on the satchel, revealing a naked sword blade inside. In a manner that tells me she's done this many times before, she opens the wooden box and retrieves a sword scabbard and grip from it, as well as an oval shaped object that must be the guard. "Oh man, the scabbard sleeve ain't fitting. And this is the only one I have, too," she says with dissatisfaction as she slowly transforms the blade from its nakedness to a fine example of a katana by assembling it, affixing different things to the blade tang. After she's done and has looked upon it with some pride, she puts it on top of the bed and turns to face me again. "Alright. You wanted to talk, right?"

In contrast to how delighted her voice is, her expression is still nothing more than the plain indifference she has given me all this time. I try to speak at first, but nothing comes out. I just want someone to help me. And I realize that nothing has changed. Everything is as it was when Ryōgi first saved me in that alley, but now I can't remember what I wanted to be saved from.

"I don't fucking know. I've done things, things are happening, and I don't know," I say. Ryōgi says nothing, only listening as she continues to look at me. I don't think I have any other choice except to continue. "When I was wandering in the city today, I saw my mom. At first, I thought it was just someone who looked like her. But then I followed her, until she went inside the same apartment building I used to live in. It doesn't make any fucking sense anymore!" I declare, my shivering becoming worse with every word. Ryōgi stands up.

"So long story short, you think she's alive. You've seen nothing in the news, so hey, it might be possible."

"No! I killed her, and my dad too. I'm sure of it. It's the ones that are alive that are fake!" I say with as much vigor as I can muster, as if shouting it will make it real somehow. I don't know if I truly believe what I'm saying. What did I see, then? I remember leaving the house a picturesque image of a blood-drenched nightmare, and yet who did I see go back into it?

"Must be my mistake. How about an idea so we can solve it? Why don't we go there to make sure?"

"Wh—"

"We go there, we knock on the door, see if anyone's inside, ask. That way we'll know for sure if they're alive or not. I'm serious!" As soon as she says that, Ryōgi wastes no time. She immediately stands up and retrieves

a sheathed knife from her table, putting it into her jacket's inside pocket, and then sheathes a second one in a leather scabbard, tucking it into her kimono's sash. The viciousness of the blades belies the atmosphere of Ryōgi's casual attitude, which almost feels like she's just going out to buy some smokes. It seems she's determined to go with or without me. I was planning on objecting, but seeing her determined state of mind makes me resolve to at least not let her go alone. And so I follow her out of the room.

"Feel like driving a motorcycle, Enjō?"

"Somehow, I feel like I don't have a choice."

"Good. I left one in the parking lot, so we'll use that." We walk hurriedly towards the underground parking lot of the building. While I'm surprised that a building this small has such a facility, I'm more startled by the motorcycle that Ryōgi shows me: A large, heavy-looking Harley with an attached sidecar, which Ryōgi proceeds to get on. Driven on by her lack of hesitation, I position myself on the motorcycle, start the engine, and start us on the way to the apartment where I used to live over a month ago.

We arrive at the high rise a little later than I expected, in some part due to the fact that I'm not really used to driving motorcycles as big as the one Ryōgi provided. The November nighttime air is so cold it's almost unbearable, and driving in an open vehicle didn't serve to alleviate it one bit. But through all that, we finally arrive at the circular apartment, tall enough that it seems like it could reach the moon. Its strange construction—circular, and actually being two buildings connected—helped it stand out from its much more plain, four-corner neighbors. My former house is located on the fourth floor of the east building. From what I know, the west building never had any residents. There aren't a lot of people living there to begin with, so I guess they just never got around to using it. I did hear a lot of people wanted to buy, but the owner was a picky one, and not at all social, so he only filled more or less half of the units in the thing. Apparently my dad knew him, so my family got in fairly easily as a favor, I suppose.

"Well, this is it," I say to Ryōgi riding in the sidecar. She casts her eyes upward at the building, looking suspiciously like she's seen some ghostly apparition on one of the windows.

"What is up with this place," is the only thing she says. I leave the bike parked in the street in front of the apartment, and I lead Ryōgi inside the grounds. A concrete wall surrounds the entirety of the premises like one of those bad community elemenatries. The circular shape of the building makes it so that it doesn't take up a lot of space, but the grounds with its

surrounding flora takes up much of the lot. Bisecting it is the paved walkway leading from the street to the building itself. Wordlessly, Ryōgi follows my lead as we enter. Inside, we can immediately spot the large central column that dominates the structure like an ancient monument. Within it is the elevator, and around the elevator shaft is the spiral stairs that hardly anyone uses. I push the “up” button beside the elevator door to call it.

Somewhere, a clock’s second hand ticks. Something doesn’t feel right. My heart is beating at a rate much higher than it does normally, and my breathing is labored. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. I mean, I’m about to pay a visit to the family I killed. That’s hardly a recipe for relaxation.

The elevator arrives.

The door opens.

I go inside.

Shiki follows.

I push the button for the fourth floor.

A deep, mechanical sound can be heard as the elevator begins its ascent, a sound that I’d gotten used to hearing a long time ago.

“It’s twisting,” says Ryōgi to no one in particular. The elevator stops on the fourth floor. I get out and immediately head for the hallway directly in front of us, leading to the east building. Ryōgi continues to follow me in silence as I take a hard left, following the corridor’s direction. Now I face the hallway outside the rooms of the east building, with the left hand side all having doors to their respective units, and the right hand side an open view of the outside world. A chest height wall is situated on the right side to prevent any nasty accidents. All of them are lit by the glow of the orange fluorescent lights on one half, and the other half the soft blue of the moonlight from outside.

“We just go straight ahead to the end of this hallway to get to my house.” I start walking again. The whole place is quiet, save for the little noises that you can hear from inside the units, but it’s all background noise that your brain tends to filter out, and besides that, you never meet anyone in the hallways anyway. At last we arrive at the last room as the hallway terminates, and I stop my feet right in front of the door.

Are we really doing this? My hand doesn’t move to reach anything, and my vision seems to blur for a moment when I look at the doorknob. Oh wait. That’s right. I have to ring the doorbell first. It’s an absolute rule, even with the key I have. If I don’t do it, mom’ll be scared shitless again. It’s all because of that one time when some debt collectors forcibly entered. Now, we have to ring the doorbell to allay mom’s fears. As I remember this, my hand hovers over the button.

Ryōgi stops me.

“How about we *not* ring the doorbell and just go inside, Enjō?”

“What the hell? Do you plan on just barging in?”

“This *is* your house, isn’t it? Besides, we ring the doorbell, I wouldn’t be able to see the trick, and that would be too bad. Now give me the key.” Ryōgi abruptly grabs the key that I produce from my pocket and inserts it into the doorknob, giving it one turn.

The door opens, and inside I can hear the low hum of the television.

Someone is inside.

The sounds of a conversation. The buzz of words. My dad blaming the problems of life on my mom and the world. My mom hearing all of it in one ear and out the other one, nodding along to everything he says. The daily life of someone called Tomoe Enjō.

Ryōgi makes her way inside silently, and I shadow her steps. We exit the hallway, and open the door leading to the living room where the noise originates. Inside is a cheap looking table, quite unfit for the how good the room looks. Or how good it would look if it was swept regularly and the trash was taken out. As it stands now, bags of trash fill its corners like necessary furniture.

And in the middle of this entire scene are my parents.

“Jesus, is Tomoe not home yet? It’s eight o’ clock, for crying out loud. He got off the clock an hour ago! Where the fuck is that asshole playing around?”

“Who knows?”

“It’s because you spoil him that he acts like we ain’t his parents. That goddamn punk better start putting some money into the household or he’s gonna get his ass pounded. Whose house does he think he’s living in anyway?”

“Who knows?”

What...what the hell is this?

Both my dad who hides behind the image of the fucking big man of the house even though he’s a coward at heart, and my mom who serves as his unflinching yes man are both alive. The two people I killed are continuing on with life as if nothing had happened. But that isn’t even the most suspicious thing about this. They’re not even turning to look at me and Ryōgi standing in the doorway, visible to all.

“What time do you get home?” Ryōgi whispers into my ear.

“Around nine,” I answer back, my voice stunned to incredulity.

“Man, an hour? Guess we got no choice but to wait.”

“Ryōgi, what the fuck?” I whisper, thinking the two would hear us.

“Explain this bullshit to me.” Her indifference finally makes me angry, but she casts me an annoyed glance in response.

“We didn’t ring the doorbell or knock, so they’re not treating us like guests. We didn’t trigger anything that fires up their predetermined response. So they continue their act thinking no one’s actually come.” Her observation finished, Ryōgi walks to the room behind us, across the hall from the living room.

My room.

After some hesitation, I follow her while trying to avoid meeting my parents’ gaze. There I could do nothing but stand and wait. Ryōgi chooses a spot on the wall to lean on, and waits like that in the room where the lights are off. But waiting for what, exactly? Nothing less than myself, Tomoe Enjō, and his return. And so I wait for me in the place where I committed murder. Not the most normal of times for me. Time passes simultaneously fast and slow for me, an eternity committed to a second, an hour where my sense of reality seems to slip away as the second hand on a clock ticks away somewhere beyond my reach.

And then at last, I hear the door open. Finally, I’ve come home. A sense of relief and dread at the same time, two paradoxical emotions combine as I watch another me enter the house without a word, not venturing to converse with my parents, and enter my room in silence. All of it is the same: The wavy red-dyed hair, the body and face that made everyone call me a girl up until junior high, the sullen look that cursed the world, and the deep breath taken upon entering the seclusion of the room; a meditative act, almost a ritual, that seemed to will all the troubles away.

Tomoe-the-other pays as much attention to Ryōgi and me standing by the wall as he would invisible specters. He lays out the mattress. My mind is blank as I watch Tomoe Enjō fall asleep, even though I’ve seen all of this before. I know what happens next. The sounds of an argument fill the room across the hall. It’s my mom, raising her voice to dad in what must be the first time ever. Then inhuman screaming. Both of them, baying like wild dogs. Then the unpleasant sound of a hard and metallic object making impact with something fleshy. After that, only my mom’s desperate breathing can be heard through the door. Footsteps, repeating over and over. The clock ticking and ticking.

“No,” I whisper, though I know it won’t change anything. After all, I’ve seen this before.

The door slides open, and Tomoe dares to open his eyes for a peek, and he sees the silhouette of his mother holding a broad kitchen knife in one hand.

"Die, Tomoe." Her voice detached, feeling nothing, but perhaps this isn't true. After all, Tomoe can't see her face against the light, but now Tomoe can see. Mom is crying. And yet, she goes on to stab him as if possessed with reckless strength, each stab strangely in time with the sound of the second hand's progress around the face of the clock. In the stomach, the chest, the neck, both arms and legs, the thighs, each finger, both ears, through the nose, a stab on each eye, and finally, on the forehead. It is then that the knife breaks, and mom puts the broken blade on her own neck, stabs, then twists. Both she and the knife fall to the floor in a dull sound that nevertheless manages an echo in the room.

Then nothing. Only the eternally reverberating sound of the ticking, growing louder and louder in my mind like a mocking tone. This is—

“—a bad dream.” That became real at last. Or whatever level of reality this is. The sight makes me sick to my stomach, but I am delayed from any further thoughts when I hear the sound of a kimono fluttering as it moves. Ryōgi moves to leave the room.

“If your curiosity is sated, then we can go. We have no business left here.”

“No business?! A person just—I just died here!”

“Did you really? Look closely and you’ll see there’s not a drop of blood on them. They’ll just wake up right as rain in the morning. It’s a cycle where they’re born in the morning and die at night. Get a grip on yourself, Enjō. You’re the one alive. That—” she points to the corpse “—is the one with a lot more holes in his body.”

I turn my head to look at the tragedy one more time, and just like Ryōgi said, no blood on any of them even though there should have been gallons of the stuff.

“What, how—”

“Hey, I’m as clueless as you as to how and why someone would do something like this, but at any rate, we’ve got nothing more to do here. C’mon, let’s go to the next one.” Ryōgi walks to the hallway and towards the door leading outside. I call out to her, though she doesn’t turn around to acknowledge me.

“What do you mean ‘next?’ Where the hell are you going, Ryōgi?”

“Durr. To the place where you really lived, Enjō.” She says, and continues walking, the briskness of her action dispelling the confusion I feel, at least temporarily.

At first, having followed her all the way back to the central hall, I thought Ryōgi would get on the elevator. Instead, she goes behind it, to the opposite side of the hall, where the corridor leading to the west building lies. Without any attempt at solemnity, she passes through the corridor and goes into the west building hallway, constructed similarly to its counterpart. I suppose I shouldn't have expected any less. I realize—even though I lived here for over half a year—that I've never really seen anyone from the east building go to the west building. It's like some kind of common courtesy.

We walk through the hallway, the open air to our right letting in drafts of biting, cold air that tells me how late it is. I glance at my watch, displaying the time as around ten o' clock. As far as I know, no one lives in the west building, which is probably why only the minimum amount of lights are actually turned on in this part, and no light nor any indication of movement seems to be slipping in the cracks under the doors to each unit. Guided mostly by the moonlight, Ryōgi presses on through the barely-lit hall.

406. 407. 408. 409. When she reaches the last unit, 410, she suddenly halts, looks at the door, and starts to talk.

"I went here on a hunch, based on a really small observation, really. Even though you said you lived in 405, I remembered that Mikiya said your name last. He's not the kind of guy to mix the order of names around. So I thought that the Enjō family must be living in the last room of the fourth floor, room 410 in other words."

"What..."

"You told me some time ago that elevator didn't work for a while, right? It only worked when all of the residents were here already, like somebody gave it a signal. The entire thing is a trick to displace the exit by turning the elevator, to fool you where north and south is. The fact that it's circular and it makes a loud sound when it goes up hides the trick. It's also the reason why the second floor isn't used. It needs the height of a floor so that it can spin around a half circle for the trick."

Displacing the exit? That sounds like a load of bullshit, but what if it's true? After all, I wouldn't know. The only thing I know is that when I get off the elevator, the corridor in front of me is the one that leads to the east building. I didn't question it since it seemed so obvious. If what she's saying is true, then I've been mixing things up, and I just didn't notice due to everything being the same. Whichever corridor you go to, you end up taking a hard left to end up in the building's hallway, and there aren't any numbers on the doors, so you wouldn't know the difference.

"Then, this is my house?"

"Yep. The house you were in for a month before the elevator started working, to be exact. After that, you were living in the funhouse we've just been to. Now that I think about it, the stairs must be moving too, or else this whole thing wouldn't work. They're spiral stairs, aren't they?"

I can't even bother to give her a nod. "But all of that can't be true. Normally, you'd notice that shit." I retort, but Ryōgi, as always with the considerable amount of composure she can bring to bear, refutes me.

"Can you still call this place normal after what we just saw in 405? This place is an enclosed space. All of the buildings you see from outside are the same four-angle mid rises with no great difference from anywhere you look. All the walls that partition the place are some kind of strange color with small patterns on them that you don't notice but your mind processes and remembers. There aren't any small inconsistencies, so your mind lets the obvious ones slide. It's not the same as Tōko's, but there's one hell of a ward in here." She puts a hand on the doorknob. "I'm letting it rip, Enjō. It's the homecoming half a year in the making," she says, a note of glee intruding in her voice.

She opens the door. There's no turning back now.

The inside of 410 is consumed by a thick darkness such that both of us can't really see more than a foot in front of us. In my head, the ticking resumes once again, and my body, and all my joints, reclaim their previous heaviness.

"Where are the goddamn lights? Oh, here they are," I hear Ryōgi say somewhere in the dark. In a second, a light burns brightly above.

I gulp. But I am no longer surprised. Somehow, I knew it would be here.

"Looks to be half a year since they died," says Ryōgi in a voice that implies no surprise in her as well. Though I know we should be at least somewhat astonished, for the living room we have entered contains two wasted corpses. What few dry skin remains is hanging on their clearly visible bones. Most of the flesh has fallen off, dry decaying on their own in the floor like a pile of garbage. They look like bodies dumped in a landfill and left to rot, with eye sockets as black and empty as a cave, and faces that no one in good confidence can possibly put an identity to. Except me. They are what remain of Takayuki and Kaede Enjō, the parents I killed a month ago for the sake of one bad dream. But as Ryōgi says, it looks like it's been longer than a month since they died. And then there is the other Enjō family that still exists on the other side.

It's all a paradox that I can no longer muster the will to resolve. Like

Ryōgi, I stand here in the room, thinking and doing nothing except stare at the bodies, as if by looking at them, I could divine the exact time and date like a perverse clock. Compared to the dream that I see every night made real earlier, this is more final, more conclusive, so much so that it doesn't even hold any surprises for me. A meaningless, worthless death for my parents.

Even so, I can't seem to take my eyes off the sight of the decay. I have the acute feeling of someone wanting to feel emotional without actually being able to. I want to be disgusted, to be startled at the very least, but no dice.

The sound of the front door opening intrudes on my thoughts.

"Spoiling for a fight, eh?" says Ryōgi, smiling upon hearing the distinct noise. She draws the knife from inside her jacket, and in one smooth motion unsheathes the blade. At that same moment, someone enters the living room without us hearing his voice or even his footfalls. His face is a middle-aged man that could have been anyone you passed by on the street, but containing a hollow expression that reeked of imminent danger. As soon as I think I sort of recognize him, he rushes forward to attack us.

But that's Ryōgi's cue to meet his steps and dispatch him easily with one stab of the knife. A second later, another one—wait, no, three—no, four people pile inside the room, clearly with the same intent, but Ryōgi wastes no time. Moving towards them, she slashes and stabs with a dancer's grace, reminding me of the spectacle on the night we first met, now made deadlier with the knife in her hand. In a few moments, it is over, and the entrance to the living room is soon covered with four corpses. She grabs my hand and urges me to go.

"Well, the residents have clearly expressed their opinion," she says in a hurried tone. "Let's get the hell out of here." I guess I can still count on her to be cool-headed right until the end. I'm still in a fair daze from seeing my parent's corpses, but I obviously can't ignore what's going on, and it makes me let go of her hand.

"What the hell, Ryōgi?! Why are you—"

"They're not human. They're human *corpses*, that much is obvious. But they're just puppets with a death wish. It's fucking sick. In any case, less talk, more run, run, run." I see her face colored for the first time with a look of utter contempt, but at what exactly, I have neither the time nor the composure to divine. Ryōgi runs ahead, while I struggle to go through the pile of corpses that Ryōgi made, observing that they seem to be a collection of adults and children that, to my eyes at least, look like a family.

I burst through the front door that Ryōgi left open and come out into

the hallway to find five more of these so-called “corpses” on the floor. No blood, like the four she left inside, though their injuries are severe. I suppose this proves they’re not really human, like she said.

In the gap of time that we were separated, Ryōgi has already travelled to what looks to be just in front of unit 408, preoccupied with another of these corpses. Watching her from here, I can finally come to grips with how overwhelmingly skilled she is. The movements of her enemies aren’t dulled or delayed, but violent and human-like when they press their assault.

But it isn’t enough to deal with Ryōgi, who dives and spins through the press of people, her movements almost too fast to follow. Each slash, each stab, each swing of the knife that cuts through bone, muscle, and sinew makes her look less like a girl, and more a force of nature, a white-clad reaper mowing down a path back to the central lobby. Despite the mass of rapid movement blocking most of my view, I see the other end of the hallway, with the light of the lobby spilling in from the right. Shadowed by this light, a black figure stands in the hallway.

At first, with the stillness of his posture, I take him for some sort of black sculpture, but I soon realize he is a man, wearing a black coat. He seems different somehow from the corpses Ryōgi is dispatching. A moment after seeing him, I freeze up all the way to my fingertips, unable to move like a puppet that lost its strings, and I am overwhelmed with dread.

I should not have seen him. No, that’s wrong. We shouldn’t have come here at all, so that we could not have met him and the spectral placidity that he casts over the entire place; the stillness that wraps around him like a tailor-made cloak.

## Chapter 11

The man stands unmoving in the exit of the hallway, blocking the one narrow corridor into the central lobby. The black long coat he wears wraps him in a shadow that casts aside the moonlight, making him look darker than the night sky. He only watches mutely as the girl in white dances and swirls to eliminate the opposition. As if feeling the gaze affixed on her, Shiki Ryōgi stops dead in her tracks the moment she cuts down the last of the corpses, the distance between the man and Shiki when she finally notices him less than five wide steps. That she allowed herself to close to that distance to someone without her even being aware of it makes her lose concentration, if only for a few moments.

But that's not the only thing about him Shiki notices. He gives away nothing, leaves nothing to be read on his face or any small movements, which are either so minute as to be unnoticeable, or else not present entirely. And it is this fact that troubles Shiki. A bead of sweat pours trickles down her brow, a chink in her otherwise calm façade.

"Ironic. By all rights this should have taken place after all of this was completed." The weight of his voice is overwhelming, almost enough to force submission with just a word. He advances a step toward Shiki, a step that left him vulnerable with an opening that Shiki could have exploited, but finds that she can't. She knows this man means hostile intent, and at worst intends to kill both her and Tomoe Enjō, and yet her feet seem trapped in place, unable to will them to move. The reason is quite simple: Though Shiki hides it quite well, she is in fact quite worried when she realizes that her Arcane Eyes of Death Perception finds a line on everything... except the man; no trace of the lines of death, the mark of entropic finality that everything and everyone carried, and she could will into vision any time she wished.

Shiki focuses on the man, just as Tōko taught her, trying to envision the lines harder than she'd ever willed before. Though her mind strains and groans at the force of will, for a moment she finally sees...something else. Square in the man's chest is a mark, a line swirling outwards like a child's drawing to form what seems like a hollow, empty hole.

"I know you," she says, the venom in her voice clearer than anything. Because for an instant when she sees the strange mark on him, she remembers a fragment of an old memory. A vision that takes her back to that rain drenched night of two years ago, if only for less than a second. The man replies.

"Yes. Two years is far too long a time." The heaviness of his voice forces its way into Shiki's ears as he gently taps his temple with a finger. There, stretching from the forehead to above his left ear, is the scar from a cut, the same wound that Shiki had inflicted on him two years ago.

"You're—"

"Sōren Alaya. It is the name of the one who will kill you," the man declares, his face still a picture of stoic calm.

The greatcoat that hangs down from his shoulders has the unusual effect of making him look like some archaic sorcerer. The sleeves move as he slowly raises his arm, pointing it towards Shiki in a motion that makes her think that he would attempt to seize her neck, though he is still well enough away for that. She adjusts her stance in response, widening the spacing between her legs just so, and she readies her off-hand below her knife's pommel, ready to add any additional thrusting force when needed.

"Your welcome is in poor taste," Shiki mocks. "What the hell is this apartment all about?" She shouts this, in part perhaps to contain the first genuine fear that she has ever felt in her life. In a rumbling tone that is more indulgent than acquiescent, Alaya answers.

"You will not find any grand designs or vast-reaching conspiracies, if that is what you are looking for. It is what it is: a product of my own will."

"Then I take it this business of recurring lives is all just a harmless hobby of yours, right?" Her gaze at the man is as unmoving as he is as they exchange words.

"Though at present incomplete, I have created a world that lasts for only a day. However, life and death alone is not enough to describe a *ryōgi*, and composed as it is with people of different lives and deaths, it is certainly not enough to contain you within it, not yet at any rate. The cycle of death and rebirth is incomplete. It is, however, descriptive of the spiral of conflict, for to the Yin, I offered death, and to Yang, life."

"So that's why the west building is full of death, while the opposite end is normal. You mages sure do bother with the weirdest, most meaningless rituals."

"As I have said, this is no grand design." Alaya offers a glance at the boy still standing dumbfounded behind Shiki. No words well up from inside Tomoe Enjō, and he can only look at the shadowy figure staring at him. "For there is naught but one state of being for any man. Dead and living cannot exist together. This place is a paradox where none can find themselves saved by the comfort of the consensus." Mentally casting aside Enjō, he returns his attention to Shiki. "This is but a simple experiment. I only wished to see if men meet their end the same way in every iteration. All

men die, but the origin also tells us that the death is predestined. Whether the result is a burnt lump of flesh, or complete incineration, a man that dies by fire does so; whether his struggle is hard or he surrenders, a man killed by family does so. Perhaps he avoids the first, or the second opportunity that death attempts. But in time, it will occur, and only our tenacity determines how long we live. But a man who dies a thousand times...well, perhaps there a deviation, however slight, can occur in the hidden law of chance. But it seems it is not so, at least not through two hundred repetitions."

He recounts it with all the clinical dryness of a doctor. Shiki doesn't know how he does it, nor does she particularly care, but all she knows is that this man is making the Enjo's family needlessly kill each other every day in an "experiment" he doesn't even seem to be too excited about. Something inside her is telling her to kill him right here, and the thought comforts her somewhat.

"So they start the morning the same way, and play out a sick drama of their last day on Earth the rest of the way? An interesting, if sick, hobby. And I don't think the greater scientific community is on the edge of their seat for the result."

"Do not make the mistake in assuming that the choosing of these families were in any way random. They were chosen because they were already fallen, broken. Their pitiful lives would have come to the same conclusion given time. I merely fabricated a hastier end that they would have acted out in a long span of pain, suffering, and misunderstanding, whether that be months or years." There is no pride, nor any resigned sadness, in what he says. Only the curiosity of an observer.

"Call me crazy, but something tells me they wouldn't agree with you, though. Look at this place. Floors bent slightly enough to not be seen, but enough to fuck with your perception of balance; illumination that's just dark enough coupled with a paint job with patterns that drill their way into your head. Anyone's bound to go slowly insane inside of this funhouse, even without the magic."

"Fine praise, but lain at the wrong feet. It is to Aozaki that you must direct your words at, though she crafted it unknowing of its purpose." He chances another step forward. Shiki aligns her knife toward the base of Alaya's neck, and before the time to talk is dispensed, she asks him the one final question hanging on her mind.

"Why do you want to kill me, Alaya?" At first he seems to have no intent to answer. But in a moment, he mouths an entirely unexpected sentence.

"Kirie Fujō and Fujino Asagami performed quite poorly."

“What did you say?” Taken aback by names she did not expect, Shiki is at a momentary loss for words. In that moment of hesitation that Shiki let slip, Alaya closes the distance with another hostile step.

“I hold the cracked mirror up to you, and you see Kirie Fujō, a woman who thrived on death only to cling to life.” He says the name of the woman who was once consumed by debilitating disease, not knowing when she would die. An individual who lived through a longing for death. She held the trait of having one soul, yet two bodies, inseparably twinned.

And then, there is Shiki Ryōgi, the name of the girl who can feel alive only through facing death, holding it close to her like a beloved trinket, but never letting it consume her. She held the trait of having two souls, yet one body, their link now definitively broken.

“The image in the mirror shifts, and you see Fujino Asagami, the woman that pleasures herself through the medium of death.” He says the name of the girl who felt nothing, and because of it, was stunted in her understanding of the emanations of the world beyond her. Only through the extremes of murder could she hope to gain the pleasure of dominion and the joy of life. Her dangerous abilities were sealed by the same dynasty through which she inherited it.

And then, there is Shiki Ryōgi, the name of the girl could only empathize with others through the act of mutual murder, risking death, and fighting it. Her honed skills are granted to her by the same dynasty through which she inherited it.

“On the precipice of death, Kirie Fujō chose the end, while you chose life. In the taking of lives, Fujino Asagami took pleasure, while you gave it weight and meaning. Surely your similarities and your differences as murderers have not escaped your attention.” Shocked into inaction, Shiki can only look as the darkness of the man approaches her. “Two years ago, I failed. I did not realize that what I needed were different individuals with the same origin. Rejoice, Shiki Ryōgi, for both of Kirie and Fujino were sacrifices made for you.”

His voice contains the first indication of passion, a voice that can barely contain the joy he thinks he deserves. In contrast, the willworker’s face is still as solid as a stone, seemingly suffering from an invisible burden on his shoulders.

“There is but one last piece to play, though there is little I can do should Aozaki read the move. Enjō Tomoe is an unexpected blessing, having stumbled back here from where my spells could not compel you to return.”

“I’ve had enough. It’s clear you’re the one responsible for all this. Only one thing left on the agenda now,” Shiki murmurs, excitement keen in

her voice. She tightens her grip on the knife's handle. The man holds his advance and points a finger behind Shiki, where the corpses of the dolls that confronted her lie. For a fraction of a second in this act, the shadows seem to draw closer to Alaya in an illusion that throws Shiki off just a bit.

**"THE VOID ITSELF IS YOUR BASE IMPULSE, YOUR ORIGIN. CAST YOUR GAZE INTO THAT ABYSS, AND FIND YOURSELF."** Within that declaration resides an emanation of truth, a lacing of magic. Though it buries itself deep inside Shiki, she nevertheless readies herself, and shouts,

"Out of the way or die!"

Then like an arrow drawn back and loosed, she leaps forth with an animalistic burst of speed and murder the only thing on her mind.

The distance separating them cannot be more than three meters, and there is little room to run in any direction other than forwards and backwards in the narrow hallway, which is why both of them are not even considering any sort of retreat. With the speed of Shiki's leap, it won't take more than a second for her to close the distance. She holds the knife beside her hip, aiming to thrust it inside the man's guts.

But the mage has other plans. He need only speak the words.

**"FUGU."** The air around him ripples, and Shiki is stopped dead in her tracks.

**"KONGŌ."** He holds a hand out. Shiki sees a distinct line begin to form on the floor below.

**"DAKATSU."** At the uttering of the word, Shiki feels even the very air around her halt.

Shiki staggers at her sudden halt, as if her body had just been filled with lead. The line that her Arcane Eyes allowed her to see being formed moments earlier is now complete, shaping itself as three thin circles spaced apart from one another, radiating outwardly from him like the orbit of heavenly bodies around the sun. The outermost circle, being wider than the hallway, instead begins to cling to the walls as a crude design would. Shiki realized the trap she had fallen in, her movement having stopped the moment she stepped into the boundary of the outermost circle. Now she is as a white butterfly trapped helplessly in a web.

"I shall take your body." The mage advances, the ghostly dark smoothness of his movement a juxtaposition against Shiki's earlier white blur of a charge. Now facing Shiki squarely at her front, she stands helpless as the man's greatcoat rustles in the wind. In the speed of events, it is only now that her mind catches up and truly begins to grasp the notion of Alaya as a dangerous enemy. He extends his left hand toward Shiki, palm open as if

meaning to crush Shiki's face in a vise grip.

"Don't come any closer!" Shiki shouts, the words coming out in staggered breaths borne out of some unseen labor. But the same force that had paralyzed her now only galvanizes her force of will. When Alaya's fingertips begin to touch her face, she recoils to avoid them, and through an amount of effort that even she does not realize she can display, she momentarily breaks free from the invisible chains that bind her and manages to move her knife hand in a violent swing downwards. Alaya's left hand is cut from the wrist—

"**TAITEN**," he says, and the hand that was falling for a fraction of a second does not complete its descent. Shiki saw the entire thing, saw the blade cut clean through the wrist like a hot knife through butter, but now she also sees no trace of a wound on that very same wrist.

"**CHŌGYŌ**." Now it is his right hand that moves, and it moves unexpectedly fast, almost as if he was anticipating what Shiki just did. And this time, it succeeds in grabbing her face, and with that purchase he lifts her up in the air. Shiki tries to speak, but her voice is strained again by the same force that made it difficult for her to speak earlier, and it comes out only in muffled and choked noises. From that hand, Shiki feels an indescribably cold sensation that goes under her skin toward the depths of her mind before slipping through her spine and spreading to each pore in her body. And for the first time in her life, she feels the last, desperate stirrings of one who knows in a moment that she is about to die.

"There is much yet for you to learn. Within my left hand are *sarira*, and not even the Arcane Eyes of Death Perception can see its weak links. A simple cut will not wound me," he explains as his hand continues to press upon Shiki's face like a machine, not slacking for a moment, nails digging deeper and deeper. He studies her with a look almost akin to scholarly curiosity. She knows that any rash action and his hand will force what strength he is holding back to crush her head.

"I will not die," he continues, "for I have awakened to my origin of quiescence. It rules me. How would you kill what is already at rest?" Shiki's eyes dart around frantically, making use of the minute field of vision still afforded her by trying to find anything...just one of the lines of death on his body, however faint. Desperately trying to will away both the cold fear moving within her, as well as the pain of the continuous pressure applied to her face, she searches for an opening. But before that happens, the mage comes to a conclusion.

"I would take your body. But perhaps I do not need the head." Suddenly, Alaya channels a decisive, crushing force through his hand. Shiki can hear

the groan of her skull and jaw starting to break. Her eyes widen as she looks and looks. There! Faint, but it is there in his right arm. Acting fast, Shiki pours all of her remaining strength to cutting that line, and it works. The arm is cut.

Alaya only grunts, but does retreat a few steps. The cut arm, from elbow to hand, still stuck to Shiki's face, but she throws it to the side and leaps back to withdraw. She takes a knee when she determines the distance between her and Alaya's orbiting rings to be generous enough. She looks down on the ground and gasps for air violently, both the pain and the effort of maintaining her faint vision of the lines becoming a strain too much to bear. After a pause, Alaya speaks.

"It is possible I underestimated those Eyes. The scene you made in the hospital should have given me all the information I needed. Entropy. Whether something is alive or dead makes no difference if those Eyes and the lines act on entropy. Even for someone of my origin, something still binds me to back to the spiral. And I wonder...how long until you even see the lines on my left hand, and it becomes vulnerable?" Seemingly paying no mind to his severed arm, he continues. "Those Eyes are wasted and a liability on you. You will be restrained before I can destroy them."

He renews his advance with one step forward, but Shiki has long been staring at the three circles surrounding him, trying to divine a key to victory there.

"You would have been better served backing off when you had the chance," Shiki warns, shifting her knife into a reverse edge-out grip. "Don't think I haven't learned a thing or six about wards. See, the thing about wards is they're arbitrary boundaries, like the one those Shugendō weirdos supposedly slap on Mount Ōmine to keep out the womenfolk and their temptations. Can't do shit about something inside it, 'cause it's the wards that keep something out. In other words, if the line is gone, it loses its meaning."

At that, Shiki takes her knife and plunges the knife downwards to the ground, striking fugu, the outermost circle of Alaya's quickly approaching protective wards, whereupon it fades and disappears, "killed" by Shiki.

"A foolish observation," the mage says in rebuke, but even so, he quickens his steps. But this time, having reduced Alaya's barriers to two, Shiki is ready. And the mage hadn't considered that totality to which Shiki's Arcane Eyes can apply. To think that it could even kill something formless and lifeless like a ward formed by the Art is something beyond even his most pessimistic predictions. And so now, even his movement is hurried. "However, there are two wards left."

"Slow on the uptake, aren't we? Weren't you listening? Your gimmick is done." Still in a kneeling position, Shiki places her free hand behind her back to withdraw something tucked within her kimono's sash. It is the second knife she had taken with her. As soon as she draws it, she flicks it with surprising speed towards Alaya. Like a stone skipping above the waterline, it flies just above the floor, singing through the air and piercing the second circular ward, then the third and final one, bouncing just once over the floor just once to gain altitude as it goes after the mage's head.

Alaya's surprising alacrity manages to save him from a direct hit, but Shiki's violence and speed of action surprises even him. The blade travels further down the hallway before settling on the floor. Despite his timely evasion, the knife still seems to have passed through an ear, cutting it clean, whereupon blood and meat and other non-descript fluids are visible.

The mage grunts in pain, not from the injury in his ear, but from the shock of impact of something hitting his body full on, a white mass that his attention can't quite yet parse after the suddenness of the knife. By the time he realizes it is Shiki who hit him, the duel is already decided.

Shiki had delivered a shoulder tackle with all the speed and brutality she could muster—enough to break at least a few bones—before she deftly maneuvers her knife in a thrust towards Alaya's center of mass.

The mage coughs blood in little droplets, grains of sand pouring out of his mouth to stain the floor and Shiki's white kimono. Shiki draws the knife out, red blood tarnishing its otherwise silver shimmer in the moonlight. Sparing no time, she immediately puts her free hand behind the pommel of the weapon to augment the strength of her next blow, and then brings the blade up to stab Alaya's neck as hard as she can in a final coup de grace, though the victor is clear. The reason is simple—

"You're persistence will not serve you well in hell, Shiki."

—Her enemy isn't dead yet.

"Fuck! Why—" she shouts, though only finishes in her thoughts. Why? Why aren't you dead? The mage maintains his characteristic dour face, with the notable exception of his eyes, gleaming with satisfaction. If eyes could smile, his are certainly doing so.

"I have lived for two hundred years on this Earth, and not even the Arcane Eyes of Death Perception will lay that span low so instantly. Entropy already acts on me, faster than you might know, but if that is the price that must be paid to capture you, then it will be so."

The duel is already decided. His left hand, fist clenched, flies toward Shiki, impacting her midsection with a force that she is sure can crack concrete. She is knocked clean off the ground a few inches, coughing up as

much blood as she had caused Alaya to earlier. Shiki hears herself retching, violent and miserable, and realizes that a number of her ribs are broken, and at least some of the organs it protected are damaged, before losing consciousness. In the end, though possessing the power of the Arcane Eyes and an affinity for combat bred into her, her body remains as fragile as any average girl. She would have fainted with even half the strength of Alaya's punch.

The mage seizes Shiki by the midsection with the one hand he has left and throws her against the wall of the hallway in an act that is probably sufficient to break all of her major bones. But that doesn't happen. Instead, the wall seems to swallow Shiki, letting her sink and drown into it as if it were water.

It is only then, after Shiki vanishes wholly, that the mage deems it fit to lower his outstretched arm. Shiki's knife is still stuck to his neck, and his eyes seem to lose their fearful intimidation. Seconds pass, but the black greatcoat does not move.

The mage's body is dead.

# Spiral Paradox - V

The morning of November 10 comes, and still no sign of Shiki coming back to her room.

She has a habit of not locking her door when she goes out, but lately she's actually been locking it like she's supposed to, which is why I can't even get myself inside and I have to be content to sit out here in the hallway like this for hours waiting for her.

As a matter of fact, it was only a short time ago that me and Akitaka waited out here together for her before Akitaka concluded that it was in vain and he entrusted that object in the bag to me. I've known her to let her evening strolls last until the break of dawn, so this isn't exactly a new thing for her. But ever since she left the office yesterday, something seemed a bit strange about her.

It's because of that worry that I'm willing to wait for her until morning, but even when the sun begins to shift the sky into the dawning blue, she is yet to come home.

## Spiral Paradox - VII

In the time I wait for Shiki to come home, the city had taken on the appearance of its morning palette. The weather, however, seems content to return to the cloudy gray I thought it had thrown off yesterday. Not letting my worry eat away at me too much, I put it out of my mind as I head to the office.

By the time I get there, it's just past eight o' clock. I hold the little hope that Shiki might have just gone straight to work, but having been greeted by the sight of Miss Tōko sitting behind her desk alone with no one else in sight, even that hope is dashed.

I quickly greet Miss Tōko when I come in, sit down behind my desk, and continue working on whatever I was working on yesterday. My mind wasn't really into the work, and yet I still move like a machine, probably because I do almost the same thing every day. Such, I suppose, is the power of routine that it conquers even the possible work deficiency resulting from a worried mind such as mine.

"Kokutō, about the data you gave me yesterday..." I hear Miss Tōko say from her desk in front of the window.

"Right," I reply languidly.

"It's about that high rise and its residents. You remember you were kind of miffed after only digging up stuff on thirty of the total fifty resident families, but that actually wraps it up. The remaining records don't exist in the first place. That's the reason you were only able to get their names and family trees, because those twenty families are pure fiction. I looked into it on my own time, but after thoroughly looking at what data I could recover four times over, I gave it up. They just reused the records of people and families that've been six feet under for years."

"Right," I repeat.

"And all of them are in the east building too. I don't know what's going..." she cuts herself off mid-sentence, suddenly frowning in annoyance as if ants are blazing a trail all over her skin. She only whispers one thing that brings me back to reality.

"Someone's coming."

She hastily pulls out something from a desk drawer that looks about the size of a ring that looks like it's made out of grass, and then throws it towards my direction.

"Keep holding that and stick to the wall," she explains, wearing the furrowed brow that always denoted her worry. "Don't wear it. Don't draw

attention to yourself. Don't bump on anything. And not so much as a peep out of you. If you do it right, our uninvited guest will leave without even noticing you."

The tension that her words create makes me refrain from asking any questions, and caught up with the abruptness of the entire thing, I just end up following what she said. The ring doesn't look like it's been made particularly skillfully, but nevertheless I grasp it in my palm as hard as I can, as if this would artificially enhance whatever effect it's supposed to bestow. I position myself on the wall behind the couch that Shiki often lies down on, and wait.

It doesn't take long for both of us to hear the distinct sound of footsteps. Climbing up the staircase of this unfinished building is an individual with an exaggerated cadence to his step—perhaps intentionally so. The steps don't stop, but instead heads straight toward this office, and soon the individual in question steps through the entrance: a man clad in red.

The man's strikingly blonde hair and blue eyes immediately mark him as not native, and his sharp and well-defined features even less so. His movements are a showman's: refined, practiced, and well-moderated amounts of the theatrical. I place his age at about the early twenties, and his nationality is obviously European, probably German. The red coat that adorns him only completes the image of him having stepped out of some Victorian era illustration. As soon as he enters, he raises a hand toward Miss Tōko in greeting.

"A fine morning to you, Aozaki! It's been too long. How have you been, my dear?" His ostentatious manner carries over even to his voice, which goes up and down in points he deems dramatic. The smile that he directs to Miss Tōko is one filled with familiarity, but I can't see him as anything but serpentine in his actions. The man stops his pace directly before Miss Tōko's desk. Seated behind her desk, she offers a cold glance at the man.

"Cornelius Alba. What is the successor of the Sponheim Abbey doing so far from home, I wonder?"

"Why, I would have imagined that to be obvious! To see you, of course! You were so helpful in our time together in London that I thought it was only fair to give you a warning. Or could it be that you find my kindness actually bothersome?" He spreads his arms wide in a welcoming gesture and smiles. The flamboyance of his princely conduct contrasts quite sharply with Miss Tōko, who continues to generate an atmosphere of barely concealed hostility. And yet, the man laughs right in front of her before he goes on with his explanation.

"And besides, why not stay? After all, Japan is such a wonderful coun-

try. It's modern yet has that isolated 'Macondo' feeling, precisely why the Ordo Magi tends to overlook it. They even have their own dynasties, and their own quaint traditions of the Art, like that *Onmyōdō* stuff, which I can't really tell apart from *Shintō*, but whatever. The splendid thing about this Japanese lot is how they don't intrude on your personal space, quite unlike the nosiness of the Ordo. When something disagreeable is happening, they don't move to nip it in the bud, but instead clean up afterwards, like janitors. All the Japanese are the same way. Oh, but don't misunderstand, I *like* that about them. It's a situation so opposite from where I come from, and perfect for the apostates who have severed relations with the Ordo, of which I am a part of anyway, so perhaps this business is none of mine." He laughs to bookend his elucidation, which is quickly becoming annoying.

Still, I guess what Miss Tōko said is true. He doesn't seem to be looking anywhere near my direction, nor noticing me in particular. Giving an angled glance at the young man who shot words out rapid-fire, Miss Tōko finally speaks.

"If idle chatter is your objective here, then you can go out the same way you came in. You trespass on my sanctum, and I could kill you where you stand and no one would object."

"Ah, but you do not remember that you transgressed first by entering *my* sanctum, so my case against you has greater merit. You were in the company of someone else at the time, and I did not know whether he was of our traditions or not, so I held off on greeting you as a proper host would."

"So I was right about that high rise apartment building. If it was you who weaved the Art into that amateurish ward, then you might want to adjust your self-esteem...downwards." Miss Tōko allows herself the subtlest smile, but the blonde-haired man does not take it humorously at all.

"Can you not see its genius? We craft our sanctums and our chantries as a space separate from the consensus, and our wards serve the purpose of keeping the stupid masses of humanity out, further estranging us and our practices. You reinforce the ward further and further, build your walls higher, and eventually the Ordo is wise to you. Either way, someone will catch on, mage or no. But that apartment building is none of these things. Its nature is covert, our own little world where we can conduct our studies in peace, far from the worries of the consensus or the Ordo. And to my knowledge, only one man can do it, with a method far from the crude weavings of neophytes and pretenders."

"Oh, so you're here for praise? For accolades? To prove that you've caught up to me and him?" Miss Tōko asks. "Well, if you want someone

to vindicate your scholarly efforts, then I'll indulge you. Congratulations, Cornelius Alba." Her voice drips with sarcasm.

"Don't you dare dismiss me so easily, Aozaki. Alaya doesn't even factor into my scale anymore. He has me to thank for the puppets in that building and the brains that I keep alive and well-functioning. Without me, he is nothing." By now the man's expression had converted into a parody of its former mirth, and the youthfulness he radiated when he walked through the door is all but gone, replaced by a menacing scowl.

"Goodness, how our little boy has grown. Don't kid yourself, Alba. Both of us are apostates to the Ordo, and our neophyte days are over. What are you really here for? If you're just going to brag about your research then you can just throw it to the rabid fanclub you must surely have in excess."

"You never change, do you? Then let us dispense with conversation for now. Your sanctum is far too dull and droll for me. In time, you'll find yourself back in that building, and perhaps there we can carry on a proper chat, in a more refined environment." He pauses, both of them eyeing each other, before he says, "Aozaki, the *Taijitu* is ours."

Miss Tōko's eyes twitch for a moment upon hearing the peculiar word. "Containing a *Taijitu* within itself? Do you really want to reach the spiral of origin so badly? You are complete fools if you think of yourselves as higher than other mages and can beat even the reach of the Deterrent."

"As I have said, there will be no interference from the Deterrent, or from the consensus from which its authority stems. This is not a new method we created, but just an old trick we never realized before. Still, we will be sure to watch our step. Don't worry. Your Ryōgi will receive the utmost care and attention."

"What the hell have you done with Shiki?!" I suddenly find myself shouting, unable to contain myself as soon as I hear the name. Both of them turn to look at me at the same time, Miss Tōko's face a picture of disappointment at my idiocy. The man in the red coat looks at me almost in disbelief. Ah, well, there'll be plenty of time for berating myself later. After recovering from the apparent surprise, he smiles his widest smile yet.

"You must be the boy from yesterday, tagging along with Aozaki here." He turns back to Miss Tōko. "I had known you to be the kind not to take apprentices, but ah, here we have the proof to the contrary, don't we? Splendid! Simply splendid! Certainly one more thing to be happy about!" With his arms gestured outwards like an opera singer, and the random shifts of his sing-song voice, I can't rightly think of him as anything but the most peculiar man.

"I suppose it would be pointless for me to say at this point that he's not

my apprentice?" Miss Tōko sighs, frustrated and with fingers brushing her forehead. "Now, if that's all, then I thank you for sharing the information. I know the face rubbing simply must be done for your sake. But haven't you thought I could report this to the Ordo?"

"The bureaucracy of that organization works against itself. All the practical preparations they would have to do to get the permission of so and so will take six days at least, and another two to coordinate with the local chapters to even get so much as a pair of feet over here. Much, much slower than the Biblical God and his act of genesis, and so much one can do in such a span!" As an exclamation mark to his proclamation, he laughs so hard he bends over, unable to contain himself, making me feel uneasy. As he tires of it, he turns his back on us, the only trace of that laugh being the smile that bends the corners of his mouth. "Well then, I shall see you again soon, I hope. I know you have your own preparations to arm, but I will look forward to our next meeting."

The man then leaves, red coat flapping about from his boisterous movements, leaving us with the cheerful disposition on his face before he is out the door and disappears from view.

"Ma'am, explain to me what the hell just happened?"

Miss Tōko's tension was gone the minute that man was out the door, and she returns to her customary laid back look. She even returns to her customary laid back answers. "Nothing. Just telling us a friendly neighborhood warning that they've captured Shiki, is all." I'm at a loss at what to say to her, except ask her the question whose answer I think I can surmise from Miss Tōko and the red coated man's conversation.

"Where?"

"Ōgawa Apartments, somewhere on the top floor most likely. If I follow the logic of their crazy rituals, then Shiki, as the *yin*, has to be in the west building." From her breast pocket she produces a cigarette, which she then lights and takes a puff of as she stares lazily at the ceiling in seeming relief. Unfortunately, I'm not as keenly optimistic as she is. I can't bring myself to believe the man in the coat when he said that Shiki is unharmed, but I can't just sit here and not make sure if it's true or not either. I head for the door with a quickened pace until Miss Tōko shouts,

"Don't."

I turn back to her. "Look, ma'am, I know it's your policy not to get involved without money on the table, but—"

"Oh, simmer down for a moment, would you?" she scolds, not really

with displeasure so much as exasperation. “As a matter of fact, I do know who Shiki *is*, alright? I’ve had a feeling this day would come when I first met her in the hospital. This is just fate collecting on the debt I owe it that day. Kokutō, you don’t go into a mage’s chantry without a plan on how to fight him. Even Alba had to get past some nasty setups to even get up here, and you’ll have to do the same, except without the benefit of seeing them. Walk in there thinking you can wing it, and I can guarantee that you will come out in a form unrecognizable to most people before you’re even ten meters past the entrance.”

When she explains that, the gravity of the implication that the weirdo in the red coat is just like Miss Tōko, with just as much hidden potential for manipulating reality in creative ways, finally begins to set in.

“But what about yesterday? We were fine then, weren’t we?”

“Because they thought you were just some regular guy. Didn’t I tell you before? Mages don’t use the Art on normal people unless they’re backed into a corner. You goof off, weave your spell like an amateur, and it’s more trouble for them than they probably know how to deal with. Make no mistake; Alba wants you dead as much as he does me.”

“That’s true,” I say, thinking it over better now that I’m calmed down. “I suppose they could even just mess with my brain, or some other horrible stuff.”

“Yes,” she nods, “and no. Messing with a brain is easy enough to do for a lot of mages who specialize in it. But it’s far from being in common use. The old ‘he’s crazy because fairies messed his shit up’ excuse tends to not work anymore, since people tend to have social groups—family, friends, the social niche he belongs to—that investigates, traces it back somewhere. The more you conceal it with the Art, the more you draw attention to some weird shit going down in your general area, and you risk discovery each time. And besides, a spell isn’t permanent. It’s a constant fight between the spell you weave, and the will of the affected mind. Sometimes, their mind wins, and the person gets their memories back, and that’s bad luck for you.”

She crushes the cigarette on the ashtray and leaves it there. She’s right, I realize it now. Things without explanation demand it, and the people will look for it, because those things are distinct only in that an explanation for them doesn’t exist. And if that blonde guy just started killing people it would just bring more eyes than anything. Add that to this new Internet thing going around, and it’s becoming easier and easier to track a person down, trace where he went. Which will lead them to the apartment building. Hence, its unassuming build, designed to make people feel as normal

inside as they possibly can. Judging by his and Miss Tōko's conversation, that Alba character can't be up to any good in there, and yet he wouldn't have touched the incident with the burglar or the dying woman who wandered into the building with a ten-foot pole, since to him, the police coming, checking things out, and finding nothing weird is better than them launching a full-on investigation.

"And so that's where we stand," Miss Tōko mentions with a sigh. "Notice, Kokutō, how Alba said that his ward was flawless. And yet fate gives us not one, but two incidents that put the high rise on our suspicion radar, and now Shiki's gone and disappeared there as well. If there's a lesson here, it's that reality will always abhor a paradox, no matter how well disguised."

"Is that what both of you called that 'Deterrent' a while earlier?" Upon the mention of the strange word, Miss Tōko adopts an almost disgusted look as she nods in agreement.

"Perhaps. It's only a theory, a metaphysical rule of the universe. It's the 'consensus' I always talk about, humanity's greatest ally, and a mage's most constant enemy. We have no ill will towards people, and only want to live in peace. Unfortunately, reality feels the same way. The combined will of all the people form into a consensual paradigm which tends to restore reality to a stable state, to combat things that logically shouldn't exist... like the Art and mages. Sometimes, when the consensus is so focused, it coalesces, and becomes a literal manifestation. It can cast its hands into fate to move otherwise normal people in positions that would topple great men. Humanity's swirling consensus itself is its unseen protector, and the people it channels its will into were the ones we called heroes, though it's not so easy to have the same result now in the plurality of our world and the ease with which we can fuck ourselves over without knowing it. The Deterrent influences people all the time, saving us without us knowing it. But don't mistake it as having any empathy for humans. It's only loyalty is to the consensus, and it doesn't take into account something like human happiness, where there seems to be no consensus at all. We can only be sure about two things: it is humanity's representative will, and it will eliminate the paradoxes of the world, the mages and their experiments with the illogical Art."

Respect and loathing permeates Miss Tōko's speech at the same time, as though she can't quite decide how to deal with this "Deterrent" business. Her story reminds me of many things, of many philosophers all speaking about something similar; and another story of a certain peasant woman of Orleans, driven to action by a force she said was God. Perhaps this Deterrent was what truly moved her?

"Well, that certainly clarifies that, ma'am. So I suppose Shiki is a part of a similar experiment, right?" I know where she's going with this, as I've learned long before that she says nothing that is without meaning, even if it might only be revealed sometimes much later. So I gathered from her conversation with Alba that this experiment—or whatever it is—is the reason behind Shiki's disappearance.

She smothers her cigarette after one last drag then turns to look at me, smiling contentedly at something beyond what I can grasp. "I don't know what Alba is planning with Shiki exactly. I just know that he plans to reach the spiral of origin. At some point, they'll have to use her body, but Alba's wasn't one for that sort of disgusting work back then, and like everything about him, it probably hasn't changed. He'll think it through until the last minute. Assuming they captured Shiki safely, she's probably still alive."

"She is," I say firmly. "I mean, that's the only thing he could've meant when he said he'd take care of her, right?" I realize I have my eyes set solidly on Miss Tōko, which she might have mistaken for an accusatory look. The truth is that I can't get the little fear of Shiki being killed out of my head. "Which is why we need to move now."

*But how*, I ask myself. I could call the police on the guy, but from experience with Miss Tōko, I'm sure a mage must always have some sort of escape plan when they need it in short notice. And so it boils down to two things: eliminate Alba, or get in and sneak Shiki out of there. I suppose, if I'm honest with myself, I'd have to say it boils down to one. I move to search for the blueprints of the building among Miss Tōko's scattered documents. Maybe I can find a way in that even he doesn't know about.

"Stop. Stop, stop, stop," Miss Tōko says with audible frustration as she waves her arms to get my attention. "Is your head really so thick that everything I've said just passed through your skull? There is absolutely no way you're getting in there. Just like when Shiki just woke up from the coma, this isn't your cue to dance. After all, a mage should face a mage. It's only proper." Upon saying that, she stands up abruptly, and puts on her brown trench coat, leather make and thick enough to probably receive glancing blows from a knife. "You got one thing right, though. No use in drawing this out too long. I'll set out tonight. Kokutō, if you'll be so kind as to get the orange briefcase in my closet."

There is a hint of resignation in her voice, and driven by that, I head to her room and open the closet. Inside, the clothes you would expect to be present are instead replaced by bags and the desired orange briefcase, all of them looking like they're quite full for a long trip. When I carry the briefcase by the hand, I discover just how heavy it is. Despite the copious

amount of stickers stuck to it, it retains its well-made appearance. When I return and hand it over to her, she retrieves the cigarette box from her breast pocket and hands it to me.

“Keep it for me. They’re cigarettes from Taiwan and they fucking suck, but there’s only one box of them, made by some weirdo. It’s probably my second favorite thing in the world.” She turns her back on me to leave.

“Is your most favorite thing yourself?” I ask.

“Good guess,” she says, laughing, “but even I wouldn’t place a person in the level of objects.” Before she’s out of the door, she speaks her piece one more time. “Kokutō, mages are kind to their friends. They’re the only thing they have in a world against them. So do me a favor: stay out of trouble, and just stay here, alright? I’ll bring Shiki back tonight.”

And with that, the brown-coated mage opens the door and departs, with me not even saying a goodbye even as I hear the rare sound of her shoes echoing upon the staircase.



Paradox Paradigm.

5  
矛盾螺旋·下

# Part IV: Paradox Spiral





# Chapter 13

To the west, an orange sunset blazed, bathing the spiral high rise in its rays and creating a long shadow pointing to the east. Aozaki Tōko stands just outside of the apartment building's garden as all the city contents itself with the approach of twilight. Her immense brown trench coat doesn't suit her small frame at all, worn more like armor than an article of clothing. She gives the high rise's top floor one short glance before taking her orange briefcase in one hand and striding through the greenery of the garden and entering the building itself.

The glass walls of the entrance let in a trace of the sunset, dyeing the walls and floor just beside it in a color as red as the sun it emanates from. After sparing a moment for a final sigh, she walks forward, then upon reaching the central elevator, turns abruptly toward the right, heading to the east lobby.

She remembers it from the last time she was here, its semi-circular shape and stairs to a second floor reminding her how large the room is. Here, the violent redness of outside can no longer be found, replaced instead with yellow lights shining on the marble floor and the cheaply painted walls.

"What a surprise! You are quite easy to incite after all, Aozaki." The statement echoes in the lobby, said by a man in a high toned voice. Saying nothing, Tōko instead directs her attention to the gently sloping stairs at the center of it all, where the man in a red coat stands in one of the steps. "But it is, of course, a surprise of the welcome variety. I welcome you, master puppeteer, to my gehenna."

Cornelius Alba's smile displays his teeth, and with a similarly grandiose gesture, bows from his waist.

"Gehenna?" Tōko asks with eyebrow cocked.

"Appropriate, isn't it? This is a place much like that ancient valley where Baalites once threw their children into the roasting fires, though unfortunately the god Moloch is not here with us now. It's a reality so splendidly demarcated from the consensus of the masses, and here we carve our path to ascension."

He has his eyes cast downward at Tōko as he speaks in triumph. But she doesn't give the man any room to read her when she replies.

"Hardly a surprise that the descendant of Cornelius Agrippa is a probable Judaizer. Unlike you though, I imagine Agrippa would have divined the true purpose to this place. And if you want to see the slaughter and wailing and gnashing of teeth that you love so much, I suggest you make a quick

stop in Kosovo or the Congo. Your pitiful operation is nothing compared to that.” Tōko sets her briefcase down on the floor, producing a dry clicking sound. “This place is nothing but a purgatory where none of the souls pass on, where endless suffering is the end goal and not the punishment. This isn’t divine, nor is it magic, at least not coming from someone like you.”

The red coated mage’s face betrays only a small twitch of muscle at her words. Tōko looks at Alba, but also beyond him, as if her opponent was not the man but the very building itself.

“Now,” Tōko continues, “let’s drop the pretense that it’s you who came up with this *Taijitu* idea and just make Alaya show his face already. You have little business with what will soon occur. I don’t know your real reason for being here, but it’s likely it has little to do with any higher arcane goals. Just giving you a fair warning in return for the one you gave me.”

Tōko casts her eyes around the walls, searching for an unseen enemy, while never returning her glance to Alba. The red coated mage looks upon her with murder and what may be the prelude to tears in his eyes.

“You were always like this,” he murmurs. “Yes, you’re always like this!” Louder now. “You always looked down on me. I studied runes before you did, studied the Art of dolls and puppeteering well in advance of you. But oh, how you fooled those imbeciles in the Collegium into thinking you were better, that you were more creative. But we both know the truth. I’m the inheritor of Sponheim Abbey, after all! After my forty years of scholarship in the Art, a mage no older than a teenager has no business even being recognized by me!”

Somewhere in his tirade, the murmur turned into an agitated bellowing that echoes in the lobby. Tōko stares uninterestedly at this man who has abandoned his niceties so neatly only to insult her thoroughly.

“Age isn’t a factor in academics, you know,” Tōko replies. “And Cornelius, don’t get me wrong, I think taking time to look younger is alright, but you’re so focused on it that your Art loses its touch, I think.” She delivers it calmly, and yet this is perhaps the worst precision guided insult she can ever throw at him. The face that once looked like it belonged to a young man now twists with hatred, returning him to his appropriate age.

“I haven’t said why I came here in the first place, have I?” With a deep breath, Alba regains composure. “I have no interest in Alaya’s little experiment, nor do I share his goal in reaching the Akasha, that numinous concept that may or may not exist. I see no reason why one needs to swim upstream to attain gnosis and ascension.” He withdraws one step upward. “Telling you about Shiki Ryōgi was my idea. The old man Alaya put himself in harm’s way to capture the little girl. Offed themselves about the same

time, I suppose. And so, this domain is mine until the structure twists time and returns him to his previous state, but I have no intention of continuing Alaya's work. I don't suppose you've figured it out, but I came here to your little edge of the world, just so I could kill you, Aozaki!"

Alba hisses her name, like a curse that could destroy his very ability to speak. He runs to the top of the stairs to the second floor balcony, and Tōko only looks on curiously. From the walls flow a curious substance that appears to be liquid, sharing its cream color with the walls it clings to.

"Playing your tulpas, huh?" Tōko utters in a mix of bemusement and scorn. With astonishing quickness, the substance oozes down from the walls and into the first floor where Tōko is standing dead center. As it nears the floor, it starts to coalesce in different places, in different forms: some humanoid, some beast like, all quite real. Their surface resembles keloid, and their mass constantly shifts, a face here and there, or some barely recognizable animal, appearing as though they are in a constant state of perfect, if unsightly, decay.

"Not the best tulpas I've seen Alba, but not entirely surprising. Hey, maybe you can be a special effects guy! I mean, of course you'd be limited to creature features and Hammer horrors, but it's better than sitting around in an old abbey, right?" She shouts at Alba even as the things inch ever closer to her.

*Well, maybe this is a horror movie of some sort, Tōko thinks. Not the kind where the problem is solved with a cross or a shotgun, though.* With barely two meters left separating her from the slowly advancing "tulpas", she stands stoic, reaching instinctively for the absent pack of cigarettes in her breast pocket. *Fuck, that's right, Mikiya's got them. Should've bought some Japanese brands on my way here. Well, we all have to make sacrifices once in a while, even for something as boring as this display of Art.*

"On second thought, Alba, maybe Hollywood isn't your calling after all," Tōko yells out loud. "There's a much more discerning audience now. Creature design workshop time! Let's see if we can't teach you a thing or two!"

With an unexpected motion, she kicks the briefcase she had set down on the floor next to her earlier.

"**OUT!**" With one word, her voice booms, containing an authority that brooks no refusal. At the mere mention of the word, the bag opens, revealing itself to be empty. And yet, something black forms a tight perimeter around Tōko Aozaki. Like a dark whirlwind given form, and Tōko right in the calm eye of the storm, the black object spins round and round, wider and wider, its speed blinding both her and Alba to its true form. In the space of a few seconds, the tulpas are completely gone, with nary a trace of the

ooze.

Still standing at the center of it all, having barely moved from her original position, is Tōko Aozaki. Beside her lie the open, empty briefcase...and a cat, peacefully relaxing. Alba can only stare at it in a daze. The cat stands taller than Tōko, even as it sits, and its body is pitch black, without a trace of warmth on its surface. A cat made from shadow, whose only distinguishing feature is the pair of eyes it possesses, resembling a hieroglyph.

"What in the hell is that *thing*?" Alba says, incredulously glaring at the cat. Their eyes meet. And though both he and Tōko know there is no other distinguishable feature on its "face," he feels the creature smile at him. Alba looks for all the world like he's just seen a nightmare, but Tōko keeps her silence. Somewhere, a steady metronomic scratching fills a tempo to the dead air. "So the rumors I heard were wrong? Your sister mage didn't destroy your familiar?" he asks in disbelief, unable to withstand the growing silence.

"Let's not start throwing around libelous accusations at your sources now, whoever they may be." Then she directs her attention to the silhouette of the cat beside her, raising a hand to pat it gently, and saying in cloying words, "Good girl. Human meat is the next item for dinner, which should be much better than the pile of tulpas fashioned from *prima materia* that you just swallowed. This one is more nutritious. Don't restrain yourself. After all, he's one of my friends from the old days. Remember all those times I told you how tasty they are?"

In an instant, the black silhouette is off, seemingly gliding above the marble floor to the foot of the stairs, manifesting the same haste that it had done only a moment before, taking no more than ten seconds to reach the first step. Its feet do not appear to be moving, or at least mortal vision presents it as such. But Alba, like Tōko, sees like no mortal, and a mage cannot be brought low so simply. Before the shadow cat had even begun to move, Alba had already begun to weave a spell.

**"False shadow, who can neither touch nor see, let the light of my Art cast you into oblivion!"**

With a calmness belying his current predicament, Alba recites the words, the incantations called lorica which many mages use to decorate the weaving of their Art. The lorica and the expression is a mage's own, colored by his choice and personality, a way to channel the Art through a mnemonic familiar to the paradigm of their mind. The goal is a sort of autohypnosis; coercing themselves into a state of mind that enhances a spell's potency so they can better manipulate the rules of the material world. *Impressive*, Tōko thinks. *He actually cut down on the excessive five-line loricas from*

*way back. Didn't even take two seconds. Guess he can improve.* Yet Tōko only expresses her praise through a snort in his direction.

**"Let my will be my fist and strike you down."**

He gestures, arm outstretched, in the direction of the shadow closing with him, just arriving at the foot of the stairs. When it reaches the first step, the very air rumbles, and the lobby instantly becomes noticeably hotter. Willed into existence right before his eyes, Alba conjures a pillar of blue flame, undulating like a mirage of a geyser and consuming the stairway. Stretching from the floor and to the ceiling it soon bursts through, it starts to rob the room of its oxygen, and the shadow that would have climbed the stairs to assault Alba can no longer be seen. No animal can survive that heat; the temperature is high enough to reduce any common solid object to nothingness.

In moments, the pillar of flame dies, but what Alba sees in its wake makes his blue eyes widen.

"Impossible," he mentions, for in the middle of the charred stairway is the black familiar, licking itself as though the spell had produced a good sensation. It locks eyes with him for a moment, and then resumes its charge toward Alba. He spares no hesitation.

**"Again!"**

Alba repeats the spell, noticeably weaker this time without the benefit of the lorica. The blue pillar appears again, but the familiar is no longer held at bay. Alba can almost see the flames pass over it and through it as the creature races toward him in a straight, unwavering course.

**"Again!"**

Flames appear and disappear yet another time. The cat familiar nears its prey.

**"Again!"**

The fourth time is as ineffective as the first. With the cat safely on the second floor, it approaches Alba and it opens itself, its entire larger-than-man sum breaking open from head to toe like a tulip, losing any semblance of a cat. With what could be termed its insides, Alba can see the tulpas he had vested so much hope in earlier clinging to the walls of the cavity, and he finally realizes that this familiar is nothing more than a mouth, an object that consumes that has simply taken the shape of a cat.

**"Aga—"**

Facing death, Alba risks one last attempt to weave a spell, but before he finishes, the thing takes him in its mouth, the cavity grasping him by the red coat hanging on his shoulders. The blackness of the shadow is the last thing he can remember before he sinks into oblivion.

## “ŌKEN.”

A third voice is heard, and a lorica echoes throughout the lobby.

At the word’s utterance, the shadow familiar that has Alba by the scruff of the neck immediately halts. Even Tōko knows enough about the owner of the voice to face it the moment she heard it. Behind Alba stands a man, burdened with eyes of perpetual melancholy and rigidity and wearing a black greatcoat. He stands stock still as though he was observing the entire time, and yet one cannot find any traces of his sudden appearance. The man retrieves Alba with one arm, and then unceremoniously casts him away, setting him down on the ground. The cat familiar, having stepped onto the curious tri-circular geometry describing a perimeter around the man, is still as a stone. When the man finally notices Tōko, she feels the air become noticeably colder, losing the slack it held seconds ago, though she’d like to think that it’s just her imagination. The structure itself seems to tense to welcome its true master.

“Aozaki. You have changed much. Has it been so long?”

“It has. I wish it could’ve been longer.”

The man known as Sōren Alaya descends the blackened steps, ash still falling from the ceiling drifting down to rest on his shoulders, and Tōko’s familiar seemingly being strung along by the spell that surrounds him. He remains on the first step of the stairs, forcing Tōko to angle her head slightly upward to face him.

“Alba has overstepped his bounds. I had intended for this experiment to pass without your notice. This encounter is a curious coincidence, but perhaps inevitable.”

“Ah, coincidence,” Tōko sighs, “the convenient word we use to blind ourselves from the sacred mystery play of fate.” She slowly retreats back to the wall as she speaks to buy time. Sōren is different from Alba. Though their facility with the Art may rate similarly, Sōren Alaya has home court advantage here in his sanctum. She keeps her attention directed forward even as she falls back, watching for any openings she can exploit even as she knows Alaya is doing the same.

“So tell me, what’s up with your Schrödinger’s mansion?” she muses. “You do already know that killing a whole bunch of people to build up a resonance of death to reach the origin has been proven impossible quite spectacularly before, right?”

“I know the history. But I also know a truth you are not privy to. I too was blinded by the success that sheer numbers seemed to promise. Given

enough men, I would come upon a soul I could latch onto in its passing of the threshold, and follow its return to the spiral of origin. But I was denied, for I looked to the number, not the manner of death. And so I studied the deaths, and as the hexagrams of the *I Ching* prescribe, I was able to discern the sixty-four manners of death, of which each resident of this domain corresponds to. What I have here is a microcosm of the universe. I witness their anguish, and record its significance, and in time, perhaps reality and my will may transmute the sixty-four hexagrams into the eight, and that into the four *shishō*, and that into the pair of extremes that is the *ryōgi*, and finally into the Akasha, the great origin.”

“Man, Alaya, this whole business of fashioning things into the whole is consuming you bad. You indulge your occult Arts, missing the true point of the *ryōgi* polarity: that opposites aren’t that way because of conflict, but because of dynamism. Opposites define each other, which is why they aren’t a whole. You place such a premium on the totality of death, give such importance to its chronicling that you’re forgetting the life that gave them their worth. Look at yourself! This St. Peter with the book of life thing you got going will only destroy you.”

“It does not matter whether I die or not. Only reaching the origin for my purposes drives me now.” His words are confident, unwavering. He truly believes in his self-appointed duty.

This building, with its self-contained spiral of death and rebirth, has existed for so long outside of consensus, it has become its own separate reality. *This place is his temple, an extension of him, and his tie to it is so strong it bows to his will*, Tōko thinks. *The entire place reeks with the resonance of the hatred the people here can no longer give voice to. It’s sicken-ing, and Alaya is making it stronger every day, with deaths that never get the opportunity to pass the threshold every time.*

*Deaths of silence borne from lovers and family, of father, mother, and the quiet march of time.*

*Deaths of malice borne from lovers and family, of friends, colleagues, and the conflicting hatred of strangers.*

*Alba was right about one thing: all of this—the confluence of all this corrupted energy, all the mana the structure is heaving forth from the land, all the death—is one big sacrificial altar, framed in fearful symmetry, all for Alaya’s crazy dream.* And Tōko finally realizes that this is something far beyond the realm of simple tricks that the Art can offer, but well into the domain of rumored sorcery, the pure magic, the product of true gnosis beyond the reach of mortal hands, and for the first time, she doubts herself.

“How can this thing stand without the consensus of humanity tearing it

apart? Something should have happened by now. At this point the Deterrent should already have made its play, moving an individual as its agent, triggering events that will cause your downfall one way or another. Why is there no one?" Tōko asks with doubt and curiosity.

"Have you not asked yourself why you yourself are in this city? Why a man would find himself burgling that particular house? Why a woman would, in her dying moments, stumble clumsily inside this building? I have kept this experiment as covert as possible, and yet here we have signs of the Deterrent working against me. I once tried to find a way to fool it, but it is all, as I realized, temporary. I simply did not have the ability." For the first time, there is something akin to disappointment in his tone. He keeps his intensity focused on Tōko, and sees nothing but her. "Any man thinks himself less once he realizes he is no less potent than any animal. Men strive for perfection, but are denied so by the consensus, a paradox that forms the theme of our lives: existing to climb ever higher heights, but rejecting the task only to exist.

"The mages who have ascended—the ones who have reached the origin—had no will to power, but instead were given that power by the deterministic properties that entropy imposes on our reality. When one speaks of ability, one truly speaks only of fate, of the prefabricated decisions, capabilities, and choices that shape our lives. We humans who have inherited the potential to ascend have fallen so far into this material world, our nature scattered and pluralized, separated from the power that is our birthright. And so I realized that while I may not have the ability to thwart the Deterrent and realize the path to the spiral of origin, I only need find someone in the multitudes that can. I needed only one empty soul, whose nature tied it back to the indescribable ' '. It has taken me many years—"

"But you found her. And her name is Shiki Ryōgi." Tōko wonders briefly if the Ryōgi dynasty even knew what the dangerous progeny of their lineage implied and was truly capable of becoming. "Then you used Kirie Fujō and Asagami Fujino as bait to lure Shiki in without attracting the Deterrent to your scent. You hold two broken mirrors up to her to make her realize what she is. Got a hand it to you, there's no better teacher than experience. Your gameplan for Shiki still isn't clear, though. What's it going to be? Bringing **Shiki** back from the dead? Or did you just kidnap her for a social call?"

"What I did two years ago only set the destiny that had been forged for **Shiki** Ryōgi into motion. A solution has presented itself. She has no need of that body, and I will take it for my own purposes."

"Wait a minute. Don't tell me you want to transfer your soul..." Tōko's voice trails off, her index finger connecting invisible dots in the air until it

finally makes sense to her. Alaya sees no need to answer, believing it to be obvious. Finally, Tōko says, "You're sick, you know that? But since you're still here, I suppose Shiki's still alright. I don't think it's in bad form to ask if you'll just give her back to me?"

"If that is your desire, then come and claim her."

"So a duel, I expect. And I don't fancy myself the violent type either. These are the punches I need to roll with when I decided to take her in, I suppose."

"I do not think it is in bad form to ask if you will not work with me in this endeavor?" Alaya pleads, though his hostile demeanor does not budge an inch. Tōko answers her with a sly smile, lowering her head politely and closing her amber eyes as if she had just made a regrettable but necessary decision. "I see," Alaya continues. "I thought that would be your answer. It is a shame that it has to be so. There was a time when we were both driven to seek the origin. I truly miss that part of you." Alaya moves a step forward, accompanied by its echoing tap on the marble floor as he finally descends to the first floor. "You were different from the other mages in the Collegium. Ambitious. Perhaps even as obsessed as any able philosopher would be. Yours was the path of the material, while mine was the path of the soul. I had even thought, that in our lives spent chasing after our goal, you would be first. But you abandoned your calling. You do not even carry yourself as a mage would anymore. It mystifies me. For what else do we mages study and seize power if not for ascension? Why concern yourself with this pointless self-exile in this country?" Only his eyes communicate his anger and frustration, but with everything else about him, he remains still.

Tōko shrugs and smiles. "There's nothing really special about it. I just got tired of the whole cosmic game, filled to the brim with paradoxes as it was. The more you learn, it just seems you realize that you've just grown dumber. Like you know how they say the clearest path to ascension is an empty mind, but if that was the case, you wouldn't even be aware of the spiral of origin in the first place? Yeah, shit like that. I accepted it and moved on. You haven't. Seems to be the biggest difference, though." She sighs through the last sentence, and the confession seems all the more melancholic for it. Now they stand and look upon each other on equal footing.

"Then you have fallen into a lie," Alaya says, his voice falling into a tone of all the regret he can muster. "It does not, however, answer why you are here."

"You've gone too far to even realize it now. And I'm telling you, it's not entirely about Shiki either. Girl's practically a mystery that even I can't

unravel. Dollars to donuts she finds her own way out of here.” Tōko briefly entertains the idea of being someone unknowingly influenced by the Deterrent, but she quickly dispels it. *I’m no hero, she thinks, not that it matters.* The only thing she accepts is her own life, built from the coincidences and crossed paths that may never happen again, even if she lived somewhere as iterative as this structural embodiment of paradox. Her resolve is borne only out of an inclination to protect it.

“Alaya, you must think me weak. And maybe you would be right. I’ve come to hold the concept of the solitary sage as an ideal, an individual with power tempered by wisdom, isolated and alone. But I know I’ll never really achieve it, with all the sins and baggage in my closet. Mages build their chantries to close themselves off, thinking themselves above the rabble, and yet retain their grip on their previous humanity in tiny, but noticeable ways. They toil with their *ars magna*, a Great Work, the final key to their labors, but for what? An abstract dream of ascension? For a fake sense of a greater good? Then where are these ‘enlightened’ despots, guiding our journey in the material world? Is it you? You think you’re pure while the mortals are unclean. Bullshit. You shut your eyes to the blood on your hands that brands you a criminal and a disgrace, all the while calling yourself ‘special’ and the true savior of this slowly ebbing reality. I once thought like you, but then I wised up down the line. Face it, Alaya. Mages entertain their obsessions of ascension and pneumatological delusions because we’re the ones that are weak.”

The black clad mage sees fit not to speak, the best thing that passes as contemplation for him. He only continues to move forward one step at a time toward Tōko, until he says, “Even if you are right, there is no turning back on the path that leads me closer every moment to the origin. Your actions and opposition force me to acknowledge you as the Deterrent’s will manifest. In the end, Aozaki, the lie has tempered your ambition. It is disappointing that you were still human, in the end.”

Tōko notes that reality inside the building shifts perceptibly along the concepts of Alaya’s mind. From afar, mage and mage end the long discourse that fill the hole of the long years of each other’s absence with a two final statements, recited almost like a prayer, a chant with the weight of tradition to it.

“What do you seek, Alaya?”

“True wisdom.”

“Where do you seek it, Alaya?”

“Nowhere else but within me.”

His footsteps halt near the center of the lobby. Together, they begin

their opening gambits in a match that seeks to expunge the other from the world altogether.

Tōko places a foot atop her fallen briefcase, carefully studying how Alaya will conduct his attack. Behind him, her black cat familiar is in complete stasis, unable to defeat the magic of Alaya's ward. Tōko remembers it, and the component thaumaturgical processes by which it is formed, all of which Alaya named after phrases and traditional mantras: *fugu*, *kongō*, *dakatsu*, *taiten*, *chōgyō*, and *ōken*. Together they form a potent ward that envelops the space around him, halting the movements of any who step within that cannot overcome its magic. Normally, such a ward cannot be moved, establishing a simple boundary, but somehow he has found a way to violate this rule, and thus became a formidable enemy, stymieing any efforts to fight him in close combat, not to mention the other Arts with which he handles projectiles.

Unlike Alba, both Tōko and Alaya never incorporated their Art of manipulating and shaping matter to compel it to an offensive purpose. And yet, even within Tōko's favored rune Art, there are ways. Tōko need only write "*sōwilō*", the rune for fire, and she can shape it into reality. Normally, she can write it from afar, in the air if she wanted, but any mage can spot the casting and stop it. For it to work, she needs to get up close and write it directly on his body, but Alaya's wards are denying her that option.

Tōko curses her inflexibility in the Art in this pivotal moment, but as far she knows Alaya is in a similar position, unless he has learned a thing or two in the years they've been apart. She had chosen crafting dolls as her metaphor for ascension, while he had chosen the study of death. Besides this, Tōko is aware of the skill Alaya can bring to bear even without the Art, as even he has seen his fair share of wars. Knowing this, Tōko has no other option except to play it defensively and attempt to lure him to the trap she had set here some time before.

Alaya makes his move. He extends his left arm toward Tōko, palm out, like a man calling out to someone on a distant horizon, and his hand makes only the slightest twitch.

"**SHUKU**," he recites. He clenches his palm into a fist in time with the lorica with a crushing weight. Simultaneously, Tōko is struck back with a sudden force, the enchanted coat she had relied on to protect her from attack being torn in a visibly radial pattern around her center of mass. The attack makes her fall to one knee on the ground. It only takes Tōko a moment to know what Alaya did: he manipulated the space she occupied,

distorting distances and creating a tear that crushed the very air she stood upon. She is surprised; even space is within his mastery now. The building and the influence his will has upon the area must certainly be helping him cast such an Art with ease.

"Damn it," Tōko coughs out, a few precious droplets of blood escaping her lips. She forces down the rest of the bloody lump rising in her throat. "How many bones did I pay for that one?" Right now, she envies the physical endurance that Shiki has demonstrated time and again. She has no time to know how extensive the damage to her body is, but she does know that her coat took the brunt of it, but that's all. One more of that, and it's all over.

"GO!" She orders, her own lorica tinged with magic. The shadow familiar stirs, reacting to it. It seems it could move through Alaya's wards after all, revealing its state of rest as an elaborate act. Tōko can almost feel what can be described as an emotion of relief emanate from it when she unleashes the order to attack.

"What—" Alaya let's slip a moment of surprise as he turns his head over his shoulder to react. With barely a hair's breadth of distance between him and the familiar, Alaya manages to perform the same trick twice, crushing the space directly in front of the hand he raises to meet the approaching attacker. Before the shadow familiar falls into the affected space however, it evades and changes its direction midflight, directing itself to the ceiling where it lands its cat paws and hangs upside down in defiance of common gravity.

"Enough of this," declares Alaya with rising confidence. He raises his other hand and directs it at the ceiling even before the familiar finds purchase upon it, predicting its course. By the time the shadow lands, Alaya has already woven his Art. The spell crushes that portion of the ceiling, and the cat along with it. He watches as the shadow seemingly folds into itself in mere moments until it can no longer be seen, presumably crushed. The spell leaves only a small gap in the ceiling where the cat once was.

"Your rook is disposed of and the king checked. Was it not you who said that a mage that relies overmuch on his pieces loses the battle when the pieces are destroyed?" Alaya mocks. He returns his attention to Tōko, arm still extended and palm open. Tōko returns to him a look of dissatisfaction.

"I'm touched that you remember that. I've walked right into your little magic trap of a building just to reminisce about old times right to the end. How could you have ever lost to that little twerp Shiki with something as potent as this place?"

"Had I been less careful, I would not have captured her alive, which was

my objective. But for you, no such safeguards need hinder me.”

“I didn’t know you had it in you to go to such lengths for the body of a girl, Alaya.” She leans an arm heavily on the wall beside her. “I swear, you and Alba have no cinematic sense for suspense. Let me tell you how to do it. Firstly, the monster shouldn’t talk. Second, don’t explain what it is. Third, it can’t die.”

The last sentence brings a moment of realization to Alaya’s face before he looks back over his shoulder. Sure enough, hanging over the hole in the ceiling is the cat familiar, with no visible injuries to its credit.

**“SHUKU!”** Alaya lashes his arm out to aim his spell at the familiar as fast as he can, but it is no use. The familiar neatly skirts the spell as it jumps out of the way and toward the black-clad mage. Flying like a loosed arrow, the familiar opens its body up in the same shape of the mouth it had donned when consuming Alba, and a moment later, Alaya is caught in the cavity. Only a faint intake of breath, an indication of surprise perhaps, escapes Alaya’s lips before he is devoured and snapped cleanly in two by the creature’s jaw. Only Alaya’s shoulder and head remain, tossed aside violently by the thrice grown shadow and hitting the staircase, rolling downwards with low, dull thuds. Tōko observes the expression of dim horror that color his face in his final moments before speaking to herself.

“Mages really should read some Clausewitz along with their hermetic texts. That’s how you do a surprise attack, Alaya.” She pushes herself off the wall and starts to walk closer to her dispatched foe.

Until she hears a cruel, crunching noise. She ascribes it at first to some far off location, at least until deep crimson blood is expelled from her lips, coughed and vomited out. With vision growing steadily hazier, she casts her eyes downward, only to find an arm, conspicuously sticking out of her own body. Tōko Aozaki doesn’t know what to make heads or tails of it at first, but she soon comes to the realization that the arm wrapped thick with blood is a man’s arm, and that the object its accompanying hand grasped is a heart.

Her heart.

And it is then that she finally realizes. From behind her, a voice whispers into her ear.

“You are correct. Insight can be found in the most unlikely places.” The voice is burdened with great grief, regret, and hatred; Sōren Alaya’s voice, without a doubt.

With blood escaping her mouth in narrow rivulets, Tōko asks, “That... was a puppet, wasn’t it? A decoy—”

“Yes.” Alaya holds her close, his eyes taking in the sight of her heart.

"But you are quite real. The fury in this heart is unmistakable. It is almost too beautiful to destroy." And yet, with an ease that makes the organ seem to have the consistency of nothing harder than a water bag full to bursting, he crushes the heart with his hand, and watches the blood seep through his fingers. "I divined the trick to your familiar. It did not come from the briefcase, did it? It was a mere projection."

The briefcase then collapses, the Art used to cloak its nature now gone. In its place lies a projector, still making noises as it settles clankily on the floor.

"Ingenious," he remarks. "An artifact of the *prima materia*, projecting a tangible creature. It is no wonder now why my Art was ineffective. It was foolish of me not to have seen it earlier."

Tōko doesn't waste her last breaths answering him. Only questions come to her lips; questions for her former friend and murderer.

"I didn't...get to finish earlier. The last question: What is it you desire, Alaya?"

"I do not desire."

They utter the same questions and confront the same answers that had haunted them for years, and the familiarity somehow gives Tōko the last force of will to chuckle, each expelling of breath accompanied by blood blossoming in the air.

*I do not desire.* Tōko remembers the words. It didn't seem too long ago now when she was a Collegium whelp, and Alaya not much more than that. When a master asked the assembled neophytes the same question, they mentioned outlandish and fantastical dreams of glory and discovery. But Alaya expressed himself differently. *I do not desire.* Though the neophytes took it as a sign of a lack of avarice in him and laughed, Tōko found nothing to take lightly in that reply. Only a vague feeling of dread. He was right in the sense that he did not desire. He took ascension as a mission, beyond the petty godly ambitions of other mages, and into something more personal that he hid well within him: a deep and abiding hatred for the paradox of humanity.

"Alaya...there's one last piece of advice you need to know."

"I will listen. Hurry, you have precious few seconds left."

"You don't know what you're trying to kill with this experiment." The only strength Tōko has left she directs to her speech, and her mouth moves in quivering movements that slur her speech somewhat. "Gunning for the Akashic Record means you're going to have to take down the Deterrent, the combined consensus of humanity's will, and the world's tendency for homeostasis."

"And what of it?"

Tōko's choking and coughing fills the air, but she says her next statement as clearly as she can. "Think real hard about which of the two forces you're really fighting."

"A joke, surely. I have long since accepted my conflict with humanity's unified unconscious will.

"That's the tune of about six billion people. Do you think you control all of them, right up to their death? Do you think your conviction will make you win?"

"I do," he replies abruptly, without hesitation or exaggeration. *The worst part, Tōko thinks, is that Alaya may actually be able do it.* The confidence of his declaration, despite the knowledge of his difficult undertaking, says as much. The last hope she can have is a faint one, but she places her faith in it nonetheless: the sheer force of paradox that may shatter his path to hubris in a manner even he could not have accounted for.

"I pity you, Alaya."

"Why?" He asks, but before he is able to receive an answer, Tōko's life finally expires before him, leaving the body a worthless husk. Alaya thinks it a shame to allow her brain to rot away as the rest of her body. *Better to preserve it, perhaps. And then study it.* He withdraws the arm that pierced through Tōko's flesh and places it atop the head, the other hand firmly grasping the dead face. With a simple twist, and the sound of crunching bone, he severs the head, leaving the body to fall lazily down against the floor.

Holding the head on one hand, he retreats to the wall Tōko previously leaned on, the same wall from whence he came. Despite Tōko's best efforts, she never fully understood this building and its genius design. It is beyond an extension of Alaya's will, it *is* him; his paradigm made flesh from floor to ceiling and every speck of space. Entering the wall like water meeting water, he disappears.

## Chapter 15

I recall the day I came across the scene of carnage.

I walked upon the earth of that scarred and solitary place, and my feet tread not on pebbles but on the fragments of bones. The wind carried on it the inescapable stench of death, seemingly threatening to cover the world entire.

It was a time of great upheaval and conflict, when men yet took to arms in the press of swords and pike, and when they knew the face of death by looking into an opponent's eyes. War followed everywhere one went, and everywhere it left a trail of men, cruelly discarded. And ever the proof of the freedom of the strong harrying the weak was visible to all who still had eyes to see.

It was no longer a question of who killed whom, or if the battle was just; only a problem of who died, and whether someone bore witness to final breath. Where I heard battle was joined, I followed. Where insurrection brewed, my feet carried me. Sometimes, I arrived when the battle was yet fresh, sometimes when the struggle was long concluded. But always, the same result: the reaper's work in droves.

It comes for us all no matter how much a father lends a shout of surrender to heaven, or how much a mother cries for her son, or how much that son dies smiling even as it expires from hunger. It steals into our private rooms, when candles are snuffed and the shadows grow larger, rendering the struggle of virtuous men meaningless.

And though I knew all of this, my travels continued. Yet all I saw bid my memory to ever return to that scene of carnage. They couldn't be saved. Men cannot be saved, though their prayers to supernal beings would say otherwise. For man is a creature not meant to be saved but to end, hiding the dread of the past with the despair of the now. And in realizing this, I awakened to my own uselessness.

I cannot save any man, for I too am a man. But if that is what is fated, then perhaps I may be admitted, at least, to record death, to craft a morbid history of observance that suggests the cycle of souls. I would make a proof of lives ended and suffered.

And so my chronicle of death began.

The man wakes to a drop of water, then the sound of hissing steam. Sōren Alaya stands up silently, feeling dazed as if waking from a dream.

“I did not know I still saw dreams. A remnant from the past, dear though it is,” the mage confides to himself. But he is not alone. Around him, in a fashion, are the “residents” of the apartment building, and closer beside him is a jar shaped glass container, sealed and held near like a prize. It is filled with a liquid, and floating peacefully within is a single head, eyes shut in the manner of sleep. Tōko Aozaki’s head.

The sound of rising vapor pierces the silence yet again. The only light in the room emanates from the flat iron surface placed in the center of the room, its red hot glow warding the shadows away in its vicinity.

The mage has nothing to do now but wait. Both Shiki Ryōgi and Tōko Aozaki have been taken care of, their bodies destroyed or—in the case of Shiki—rendered immovable until such time that it serves its purpose. No one is left in any capable position to threaten him. So he waits.

“Alaya!” Announcing his presence, the red coated mage calls out to him as he enters the room unbidden. “Why do you delay here? You can’t slacken when there are things yet left to attend to.”

“It is finished, Cornelius. There is no need to ransack Aozaki’s sanctum. And though I have released Tomoe Enjō, he will not pose trouble to us. Learn to recognize these things and accept them.”

“Granted on both counts. But the question of Shiki Ryōgi still remains. You’ve only rendered her unconscious, correct? If she wakes up, she will obviously try to escape. We don’t have time to deal for such an eventuality when it happens, so maybe it would be wise to watch over her?”

“Baseless fear and nothing more. She is not simply confined to a room, free to wander. I have contained her in the space between spaces, a pocket realm within the structure. That is what the Art I wove her is designed to perform, after all. That besides, her body is weak, and even if she regained her consciousness, she can expend only little effort to escape. She will not run.”

Cornelius looks on Alaya’s consistently troubled face with a look of dissatisfaction. “Fine. I will take your word for it. I don’t even care about the Ryōgi girl anyway. I took your offer for different reasons, if you will remember.” His glance wanders to the glass canister placed on the table beside Alaya. “This isn’t what you promised, Alaya. You said I would be the one to kill Aozaki, or was that a lie?”

“You missed your chance and you have paid for it. I had no choice but to strike her down.”

“Strike her down? Don’t make me laugh. I know better than you the

nature of those canisters. That thing yet lives. Perhaps a soft spot still exists beneath that hardened exterior of yours, eh?"

Cornelius' question only elicits a low hum from Alaya which he cannot determine as a sign of assent or disagreement. Both of them know, however, that Tōko Aozaki is, in a sense, still alive. Her brain, at any rate. It is only unable to speak or to think. If that can be called a state of living, then it is them who recognize it as such.

"Looks like I'm not the only one that missed his chance," he insinuates. "Remember the Collegium, Alaya. She was the Wild Red, or so people called her in fear in the past. Always the fox, ever cunning. If anyone would have plans designed to be set in motion even beyond the grave, it would be her. We should kill her."

"What a fool you are to even utter that title of disrespect against her, Cornelius."

"Wh...what?" The red coated mage's words falter. Alaya ignores the momentary lapse and takes the glass canister beside him in hand, extending it towards Cornelius. "Take it and go, if it will satisfy our promise. I care not what perversions you desire to visit upon it." He hands it to the mage without reservation. Cornelius takes the overlarge canister with both hands, his eyes seemingly lost in the great gift being offered to him and his face barely able to hold back a wide grin.

"And I will gladly take it. So you do not care what I do with it, correct?"

"Do as you will. For indeed, you have already written your own fate." Alaya's silent but heavy words fall on deaf ears. Cornelius is positively overtaken with glee as he starts to walk out of the room, satisfaction coloring the sound of his every step.

## Paradox Spiral - VI

Metal bolts feel like they're being hammered into my head in a steady metronomic pattern. The headache becomes worse every minute. Yet right now, I can't seem to focus on it. With wildly chattering teeth, I hug my knees and lean against the wall in a fetal position, slipping in and out of recollection as I stare blankly at the opposite wall.

Goddamit. Has it been hours since the madness in the Ōgawa Apartments, or only a few minutes? I can't keep track anymore.

Ryōgi fought Alaya, and I stood there still as stone unable to do anything except watch. Alaya died, that much I could see at first. Ryōgi plunged the knife in his chest and neck, as deep as it would go. It would be a monstrous thing for him to survive that kind of assault. But he did. I saw the knife stuck to the base of his neck slide ever so slightly outward. I watched in a state of simultaneous disgust and morbid fascination as his muscle, moving by its own volition, slowly forced the intruding blade out of his own flesh, until finally the knife fell to the floor and bounced lightly toward me with a neat metallic sound.

Then with a subtle drawing of air, as though he had never stopped doing it, Alaya breathed again. The sound of the knife brought me back to consciousness. As Alaya didn't seem to be moving, nor indeed to be taking notice of me, I assumed it would be fine to carefully crawl towards the knife and take it. I held it with both hands and looked back up at Alaya's stock still figure, only to find his fearful eyes meeting mine.

Without thought, I screamed, dispelling any thoughts of me using that knife to make good on Ryōgi's sacrifice. In a daze, I ran. Ran as fast as I could, thinking that Alaya would chase after me, and that if he did that, I was certainly a dead man. But it didn't happen, and I escaped the building gasping for breath but not stopping until I reached the motorcycle parked outside. With it, I fled and tried to get as far away from that tower's looming shadow as possible. And so I came here, back to Ryōgi's room, the owner of which has just been captured...or killed.

I'd always found the room to be a bit drab, but it brings me a sense of security now, however false it may be.

Goddamit. Word of the night. It keeps repeating itself inside my head, an admonition of how much scum I am. Because in the end, like a coward, I left Ryōgi there to die. I saw my parents, or whatever they were die again right in front of me, but it's not registering all that well on my mind. I saw my nightmare realized before my eyes and I don't rightly know what to feel

about it yet. At least I found out what they really were, but the events of the past hours have wiped my mind clean of any thought except one.

"Goddamit." I whisper it now. My trembling won't stop, even though right now I can be sure I'm alone. Hah. Alone. What has my isolation served me up to now? What can I really do alone? Not help Ryōgi out, that's for damn sure.

"Goddamit!" I yell, each syllable a mocking sound that worsens the pain in my head. Thinking about saving Ryōgi is suicide if it means I have to fight Alaya. And how can I even do that when even the memory of that man makes me draw in closer, makes the shadows just that more threatening? No, I'm in no state to even entertain the thought of rescuing her.

There is the sound of highly tuned and repeating clockwork emanating from a place I can't trace. Pain shoots through my arm. Must've hit it on something when I was running. I'm tired. So tired. The headache won't stop, the pain in my joints has been going on forever, and even breathing doesn't seem to come any easier to me, and it becomes so hard to bear that a tear streaks down my cheek. With my knees held close, I start to cry alone and with pitiful mumbles. In the end, just like other people, I never escaped being fake. I wanted so much to be real like Ryōgi, but it turns out you can't run from what you are.

I had the one final chance to be real. My eyes find themselves dwelling on the bed, the usual sight of a sleeping Ryōgi somehow disquieting. In her place is the sword that she had assembled and casually thrown to the bed just a few hours ago. She saved me. She believed me when I said I was a murderer, even made it sound like it wasn't so bad, and it made me want to be with her, like kindred. It's the last thing about me that isn't false, and I cling to it. She's done so much, and I can't leave her just like I did.

"What—", I whisper, finding many ways to finish the question in my head. What am I busting my ass for? What am I trying to protect? What the hell am I thinking? I'm not really sure just yet at this point, but it's the first time I've thought of not looking out for myself. Ryōgi represents something more and something bigger than I am. I ran from my house the first time with blood on my hands and needing someone. She gave that to me, and now she needs me.

*Then will you die for me?* Her question returns to me, and I remember the confidence in me when I said my answer. I guess I already know what I have to do. Then what the fuck am I sitting around on my ass here for? Even if it's borne from false conviction, I need to stand up and get out that door.

"I know what I said, Ryōgi. And if it helps you any, I'm gonna die for you," I whisper to myself as I retrieve the knife that she once used, hoping I hold

it with the same firmness with which she did.

I begin to take a step towards the door when the doorbell rings loud and clear, piercing the pervasive silence that had blanketed the room since I went inside. I freeze instantly, and raise the knife in the futile emulation of a defensive stance. Did Alaya follow me after all, or is it just a visitor? No, I know Ryōgi doesn't get any visitors. Alaya then. Do I stay silent and pretend no one's home? No, Alaya won't be driven away that easily. Fuck it, I decided to do this, and I'll do it. I'll attack him the instant I open the door. Maybe I'll kill him, or at least drive him away for now. Fat chance, but the only chance I've got.

I hold the knife raised and at the ready, approach the door, and then turn the doorknob. I swing the door open wildly and as fast as I can, catching the man on the other side of it with a grapple with my free hand. I immediately drag and throw him inside the room. He hits the linoleum floor hard, and I close the door shut with a swift nudge of my heel. Pressing my advantage while he's still confused, I sit myself on top of him, raise the knife above me—

—and stop.

The man lying dazed and blinking below me, with his black framed glasses and similarly black hair, doesn't look even remotely threatening. And though he certainly looks a bit older than me and wears a weirdly all-black ensemble, he looks far from hostile; in fact, he looks more annoyed than anything. I look at him suspiciously as I whisper, "Who the fuck are you? You and Ryōgi know each other?"

"Yeah. And you're Shiki's, what, friend?" he asks with a tone that would make you think he hadn't been pulled and forced down hard to the floor only moments earlier, but instead had just met me on the street.

"Me? I, er—" What could I answer? "Fuck that. The important thing is, Ryōgi's not here. Get your ass back home." I stand up, allowing him to leave, but he doesn't, instead staring intensely at my hand. "What, fall got you bad? Look, I'm sorry for the violent greeting, alright? But I don't have time to be messing with you just now."

"That's Shiki's knife. What's it doing with you?" he asks, his voice gaining a sudden sharpness. There is only a small pause before I can lie.

"She lent it to me for safe-keeping. No business of yours." I try to look at something else while I say this, determined not to let him read me, but it's useless. He stands up and looks at me straight.

"It *is* my business. She barely lets anyone lay so much as a finger on any of her blades, let alone that particular knife. Either Shiki changed that particular policy overnight—" He grabs my shirt collar with a force I didn't

expect. “—or you took it from her somehow. Excuse me for thinking it’s the latter.”

I fling off his hand from my collar as I look away from him again, not because I didn’t want him to read my face, but because I couldn’t stand to look at the honesty in his eyes.

“It’s not either. The truth is, she dropped the knife, which is why I need to hurry up and give it back.” I turn my back on him and head back inside the room to prepare what I need to bring when I leave.

“Wait, so you’re not one of them?” I hear him ask from behind me. I was all set to ignore him, but there’s something in his question that bugs me.

“Which ‘them’ are we talking about here?”

“The weirdos from the Ōgawa Apartments.” The mention of the ominous name caresses my mind like a soft whisper, and it stops me in my tracks. Briefly, I entertain the thought that he could be bluffing, but why would he? In the end, he interprets my lack of an answer in his own way.

“It’s true, then,” he sighs heavily. “Shiki really has been kidnapped.” He heads for the door.

“Hey!” I call out to stop him. If I’m right, I know what he’s planning to do. But I can’t let him go alone. For one, I’m pretty happy that I could have found what may be a potential ally and here he is about to run off alone when we have the same objective. I cross the room back toward the door.

“Hey, hold up!” I say as I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him before he goes out the door. Again we find ourselves in front of the doorway, but this time, I hope, in a much more different footing.

It was easy enough to make him listen once I told him we wanted the same thing, and so we explained our situations, both of us strangely forgetting to share each other’s name. Without going into too much detail, he explained that he’s a friend of Shiki’s from their high school days. Apparently, a red-coated man named Alba declared to him earlier this afternoon that they had Ryōgi.

At first I found it strange that it happened in the afternoon when me and Ryōgi definitely went to the building at night, but when I look at the clock beside her bed, it shows the time as around seven o’clock in the evening, which means that I’ve been in this room for almost an entire day and I never even noticed it until I snapped out of it.

He explained that he knew a woman named Tōko that went to the Ōgawa Apartments for him, and he said he trusted her to get Ryōgi back. But with so much time having passed, he suspected that she might have been taken

by surprise and could be captured or killed as well. Left alone, he couldn't sit on his ass and wait and instead decided to take action by himself.

I explained everything about what happened last night. About the apartment's east and west building. The two units that I supposedly used to live in. How Ryōgi was captured by Alaya. And reluctantly, I told him about the parents I killed, and the time when Ryōgi found me wandering around the city. Throughout the entire thing, he listens without flinching or casting any doubt on me, even when I, at the center of all this craziness, think that the words coming out of my mouth seem almost like a late punch line to a long-stale joke.

After I explain my situation, he wears a dead serious look, and asks me, "So what do you think about all of it?"

"Doesn't really matter right now. The important thing right now is to go get Ryōgi out of that place."

"I'm not talking about her right now, am I? I'm asking about your parents. Which of them do you think was real?"

I haven't even given that matter too much thought, and yet here he is worrying about it as if it was his own problem. Unbelievable.

"It doesn't make any difference. Just leave it be for now."

"Actually, it might make a difference. If what Tōko said is true, then that apartment complex is liable to make you crazy just by being in it. It might not even be your fault that you killed your parents. Maybe it's just the building messing you up." His eyes don't wander away from mine, sharp eyes with a different, even opposite intensity than Ryōgi's. What he said doesn't help me, though. I know what these hands did.

"No. I killed them, that much is true. It's time I accepted that. I can't ever wash my mom's blood off my hands. Running from that only makes me a coward."

"Well, how about your dad? So far you've only been saying stuff about your mom. Look back closely. Maybe you only killed your mother."

"Fucking give it up already! He's dead, alright! I saw his fucking corpse so—" I hesitate. I saw his corpse for sure, but was it really me that killed him? If I go back to that night in my head, I remember real clear how it went with mom, but now that I think about it, I don't remember how I killed dad at all. Maybe because, just like the story those half-year old bodies me and Ryōgi found in the east building told...

...mom had already killed him. The same way the fake mom of the fake Enjō family in the other end of the building is surely killing him again this very moment, surely killing the fake me in the next minute or so, every night without fail.

So I was never running from a terrible dream. Only running from an even worse reality, and I with these hands, I tried to end it. It takes me a while to notice that my teeth are beginning to chatter.

"Leave it be, for chrissakes," I try to say emphatically, but it comes out as more nervous than I'd intended. "Maybe you're forgetting what we're actually here for." I shelve the thought of my parents in my head for a while. I certainly have more time to deal with that later. "So you got a plan, right? If you were planning to go alone in the first place, then you should have something up your sleeve."

"Well, maybe," he says hesitantly. "I dunno, maybe we take this to the blue uniforms or something."

What the hell is he on?

"Oh, sure let's just call them up and say we've got ourselves some magic problems. And even if they do believe us, there's hardly any time left. Are you serious?"

He shrugs with an indication that that was the answer he was expecting. "Not really, but I had to hear it from you straight. Look, you're obviously in a bit of a hurry to bust in without a plan there, but be realistic here. I know Shiki's important, but you're life is just as valuable, and you only got the one."

"Hah! You were ready to do the same thing minutes ago. As if you would understand. There's nothing for me. No one to help me, and no one else I can help—except Ryōgi. I swore I'd help her, you know. And you better bet I'm gonna do exactly that. It's the last—"

I feel a lump in my throat rising, and somehow I can't finish the sentence, and I get the same feeling I got when I swore to Ryōgi at knife point. I only want to help her, maybe even to die helping her. There's no point in living a life full of worrying, constantly looking over my shoulder without a reason to keep me going. No, I'm done. But dying doesn't need to be worthless. The last thing that can give me meaning is saving Ryōgi. After all, what better way to go out than to die for the girl you like? This guy...he knows what I'm about. He knew what I wanted to do even before I said it, with those pointed eyes of his.

"Well, I don't know if you catch my drift," I mutter weakly. It's the only thing left I can say. He stands up from the floor slowly and without a sound.

"Mmm...maybe I do, maybe I don't. But we'll soon find out, won't we? Before we get Shiki back, we've got to go to this place I know first. Just follow my lead, Tomoe Enjō."

He rushes toward the door, opens it, and gets out faster than I can ask him how he knows my name, and soon the question fades from my mind

as I follow him back out into the city's cradle of night.

Me and the guy walk away from Ryōgi's apartment, going to the nearest train station in the busy commercial district. I follow him as we ride in a direction that unexpectedly goes away from the Ōgawa Apartments, and eventually we get off at a lazy station. This is a residential project part of town very much far from the madding crowd of downtown. Even the station, with its unmaintained flooring and lack of turnstiles, would seem deserted if not for the occasionally flickering fluorescents providing it with lighting. In front of it stand two small, quaint convenience stores standing in solemn company, though it looks like they're without customers right now and are dead for the night.

"This way," the guy in the glasses says after studying the local street layout in the station. He starts walking at a brisk pace, and I try to follow along as best as I can. We maintain our pace for a few minutes, him leading the way. No matter how far we go, I observe only houses to our left and right in various states of repair, all quiet with a light or two on, all of them probably having just finished dinner and the people already starting to wind down. Our steps on the concrete sidewalk are the only things we can hear, and it makes it seem as though the entire area is blanketed with some kind of vow of silence that we're violating. The streets are narrow, making the sidewalks even more so, and the darkness is held back only barely by the pools of light made by dim streetlights. The occasional dumpster provides homes for stray dogs on the prowl, but elsewhere the streets are colored with human detritus.

I gather that this was the guy's first time in this neighborhood. At first I thought this side trip was to get some sort of preparation for rescuing Ryōgi, but now that doesn't seem to be the case. I've been generous with my silence ever since we left Ryōgi's apartment, but now I'm starting to get irritated. We really don't have the time to be taking a leisurely stroll.

"Alright, cut the crap," I say, breaking the silence. "You can tell me where we're going now."

"Just a little further," he answers without looking over his shoulder. "Look, over there," he points a few houses farther in front of him. "It's a park. And then there's the empty lot right beside it."

As I follow him we eventually pass the park he referred to, which seems as deserted as the rest of the area, though somehow I imagine this one is similarly deserted in daytime. In it, there is a playground with the ground flattened, lacking the slide and jungle gym that's present in any half-decent

playground. The poor excuse for bars that hold up the two swings are red with rust; nothing's been reflected off of them for years, probably.

"Wait a minute—" something flits by my mind.

I know this park...from the childhood memories that I compartmentalized in a part of my brain. There were memories there, memories of playing in the mud and sand. I stand stock still in front of the park, leaving the man to go on ahead, not noticing I'd stopped. He himself halts in front of a single house beyond the empty lot beside the park. After taking a moment to collect myself, I hurry and chase after him.

When I approach him, he looks back at me with sad, almost regretful eyes. Spurred on by that, I cast my gaze at the house that he had been staring at only a moment ago, now in front of both of us where I can get a better look.

My heart skips a beat.

It's a small, quaint bungalow. Half of the gate is gone, seemingly torn from the spot, and the other half a rusting iron mess. The small garden between the gate and the house is a chaotic mess of weeds grown tall and wild, encroaching upon the walls of the house, themselves suffering from chipped, peeling, or cracked paint. A ruin. When was the last time a person lived within?

I try to speak but no words come. My eyes remain affixed on the long-forgotten ruin, and unaware, I cry. Not a cry of sorrow, regret, or pain, but only a flow of tears that I am unable to stop. It's not the same. Everything's different. But the soul remembers. It's something I can hide but will never be able to forget, even ten, twenty, or thirty years on. This place will probably always catch up with me.

My first home.

The home I'd lived in until I was eight years old, but a life that seems an eternity and a day ago for me to almost forget.

*Tell me, Enjō. Where's home for you?* When I once answered that seemingly simple question, she looked unsatisfied, even disappointed as she shook her head. *That isn't what I asked. I'm asking about the place you really want to go back to. Well, if you don't know, can't say I didn't expect it.*

Is this what you meant, Ryōgi?

But what's in here except a decaying, collapsing ruin of a house? Only memories. For a while, I remember my parents as they were before I killed them: the abusive father that ruled like a king, and the acquiescent mother that would only say yes on command. The parents who gave me no food to warm my belly, or clothes to warm my body. The parents that did nothing

except be a burden to me, and whose deaths I cared less for than Ryōgi.

If that's all true, why am I still crying?

When I saw their dried husks in the Ōgawa Apartments, there was also a numbness similar to the numbness in me now, and I couldn't bring myself to move, like I'd forgotten something important and it haunted me. But now, with a difficulty that made my feet feel like they were in water, I walk past the gate, and into the small, cramped garden. It seemed bigger when I was a child.

The wideness of the garden; the father that patted me on the head with a laugh; the mother that saw me off to school wearing a smile; these are what I remember now. The reality of the now almost makes me doubt the truth of it, like you would when dreaming a dream good and true, but waking up to a something more a lie than the dream. But I know what my mind can call back, and all of it was no lie, only a clear happiness hidden inside the depths of neurons and firing synapses.

*Tomoe*, I hear a voice say, somewhere in the past. When I turned around to face it, I saw the front door of the house, and the determined face of a man. *Come here. I'm going to give you something special.* A kid, still a boy, red-haired, and with a body thin like a girl's walked up to the tall man.

*What's this, dad?*

*The key to the house. Don't lose it, okay? Even though you're still just a boy, you can keep mom safe with that.*

*But it's just a key.*

*Exactly. The key to the house protects our family, so that even when mom and dad are out of the house, it'll be alright. It's proof of the fact that we're family, and we protect each other.*

How much could the boy have understood within the words of his father? And yet he took the key from his father's hand, grasping it firmly as he answered.

*I get it. I won't lose it. Don't worry, dad. I'll keep the house safe, even when I'm all alone.*

All strength leaves my legs, and I stumbled onto my back. I try to get up, but my legs refuse it. The memories are all so clear now. The key was important all because it protected my family, a proof that a family to protect even existed. And like a curse descending on us, the family started to fracture when I no longer remembered it.

The past—when my mom could still be kind, and my dad could still be good, when they both treasured their son—that was a more definitive truth. The time when the years passed, and that truth was lost, was when I decided that everything was a lie. I was a complete idiot. I only lived on

the day to day, judging my parents as worthless because I thought they couldn't get themselves right. I isolated myself from their little gestures, from mom looking like she was trying to say something but couldn't every time I came home from work. But I never thought about what happened to them, how dad must have never gotten a job because he kept getting refused because of the record of that accident, and how the pressure of the people around him must have gotten to him. Or how mom soldiered on despite the rumors and gossip that saw her gaining and losing minimum wage jobs over and over again. They did it for me, but I forgot this and became a criminal instead of a victim. I turned my back on them, and we forgot each other. Mom had it harder than me, being abused by dad at night and working silently by day, never having anyone to reach out to. We were all broken by the time I'd dirtied my hands with her blood, but she had the worst of it.

If I'd looked over my shoulder to talk to her just once, maybe...maybe we could have gotten through it all.

"Here I am. The ultimate selfish idiot." I cover my face, trying to stop the tears, or at least to hide them. Now's the time to own up for my sins in their memory. It wasn't the dream, or that crazy apartment that made me kill them. I did. I alone. I couldn't help them at all. But to atone for it, I had to go to Ryōgi, get her out—

I lower a tear-soaked hand to the soil I am sitting on, and grab a handful of dirt. The tears have stopped now, but the weight of their deaths still hang. I grip the soil tightly in my fist, almost ceremonially. My own last rites to conclude this little stopover. The wind stops; a signal for me to go. To start sprinting like I'd always wanted to, no longer to run from what I've done, but to see it to the end.

When I look at the ground, I see the shadow of the guy in glasses standing a few feet away from me, saying nothing but looking intensely at me as I collect myself. He was right. I had to come here. Because he knew that, I knew I could count on him as an ally. Besides, it's better than making enemies with the boyfriend of the girl you liked.

Without turning my head back I say, with a laugh, "Good entertainment watching me or what?"

Beside me, I see the shadow of him shaking his head bitterly. "Sorry. I knew your history, but I thought it wasn't right to say anything. I was lucky to be born in a good house with good parents, so it didn't feel right."

A good guy, this. At least he knows the times when words said in comfort sound more like lies. But I also know not to turn down sympathy when I need it.

"Then keep the talking down, will ya? Gotta respect the moment, man. 'Sides, I think I like you better not talking," I say, still hard-pressed to stop my laughing.

"I do have to say this, though," the guy starts to say, "and Lord knows I've been saying this to a certain someone more times than I care to count: if you think you've got nothing else left, then all you got is you. It'd be a big mistake to throw yourself away without good reason."

The moonlight, so faint behind the cloudy night, nevertheless brightens the soil of the garden. I remember the night when I said to Ryōgi that I'd die for her, and she brushed it off like she didn't want it. It's only now that I realize that she was saying the same thing, and the fact that I'm being reprimanded by someone so different from her with the same essential argument is probably some kind of sign. The thought of it only makes me laugh even more.

"Think you can get up by yourself?" the guy asks as he extends a hand toward me. "Or do you need help?"

My laughing finally subsides. I look at the hand he offers for only a moment before I gently push it away. Even though all the joints in my body have been crying out in pain since the night before, my obstinacy has to be given some merit. And so Tomoe Enjō stands up.

"Thanks, but I don't need it. After all, I've done everything alone up till now." The man nods, pushing his glasses up a bit.

"Yeah, I guess I knew you'd say that." For no apparent reason, he smiles. I return it.

We headed back to the guy's house, an apartment in the downtown area, to get his car, which he's currently driving at a steady if slow clip toward the Ōgawa Apartments. Stored inside his car is a duffel bag that has the tools we need for the task of rescuing Ryōgi.

He explains his simple plan as he drives. Going in by the front entrance is liable to get us noticed real easy. So this guy plans to be the bait by doing just that while I get to comb the place for Ryōgi, starting from the tenth floor, where she is most likely being kept since it's the most inaccessible place. I get to be the one that finds Ryōgi simply by dint of the fact that Alaya would pay more attention to someone he doesn't know going inside the building rather than me, who does know me and what little I can do to stop him directly.

"Still," I begin to ask, "wouldn't I just be spotted as easily as you would?"

"Not if you go underground you won't. Here's a layout of the build-

ing.” With one hand on the steering wheel, he reaches with the other hand inside his bag resting on my lap, taking out a large piece of paper and setting it above the bag for me to see. It shows the floor plan and cross section of the Ōgawa Apartments. He points to it. “Look here. The place has an underground parking lot. There’s manhole access inside it, and you can get in from another manhole outside of the building. I don’t believe the parking lot is actually used right now, so it should be clear.”

It’s true. Though the elevator in the building has a “B” button on it, it doesn’t work, so I assumed it just wasn’t built yet. He continues. “That’s probably where they do all of the dirty work they need to keep that apartment running. Makes sense, since the noise won’t escape and nobody would’ve suspected a thing.”

“I’m guessing the jack, screwdrivers, crowbars, and manhole hook in here are for when I’m opening the manhole covers in and out?” I ask as I rummage through the duffel bag to see what else is inside it. The guy nods sternly.

A few more minutes pass, and we finally arrive at Kayamihama, the district of reclaimed land where the Ōgawa Apartments stand. He stops at an intersection about a kilometer away from the apartments, and we get off. With the time standing at ten o’clock, not a soul can be found wandering the streets, even though this is one of the more well-lighted parts of town. The guy points towards the road a fair distance from where we’re standing.

“The manhole you need is a ways over there. When you’re in, just follow the westward flow of the water and count the number of manholes above you as you go. The seventh one should be the exit leading to the underground parking lot.”

“Yeah, yeah, I read the street infrastructure map inside the bag too, you know,” I grumble as I double check the equipment inside the duffel bag. I reach for my pocket just to see if Ryōgi’s knife is still there. From the car, I retrieve the sword we got from Ryōgi’s room before we went here. If in case I face Alaya, it wouldn’t hurt to have an abundance of weaponry at my disposal.

“Watches synchronized, right? At around 10:30, I go inside the building, while you should be in place to go through the parking lot,” he says without a hint of hesitation.

“You sound like you’re used to this sort of stuff.”

“Trust me, I’m not.”

“Then you gotta tell me what’s going on between you and Ryōgi for you to go this far for her.” And so I finally ask the question that’s long been

sitting at the back of my mind. For a fleeting moment, I see the guy furrow his brow, but he refrains from answering. "Hey, we might die here! Aren't you scared at all? Why do this? What are you to her?"

"Of course I'm scared. I'm not in the regular business of rescuing people." He closes his eyes, and speaks in a low, almost cautious voice. "I'm obviously not built for this sort of thing. I'm risking my life. But then I remember the girl me and Shiki once met. Some fortuneteller kid who could see the future."

"What?" That's certainly a sudden change in topic.

"I remember that kid saying that if I continued to have anything to do with Shiki, I was putting my life at risk. Something would happen that would see me betting my life on some gamble for Shiki." He says this without a laugh or even a self-mocking smile, and so I follow him with the same serious weight he gives it.

"So you think it's what we're doing now, then? So what did that kid have to say about your prospects of living?"

The guy only shakes his head and shrugs. "Well, she didn't say anything about whether I'd die or not. So I guess that's still in the cards, isn't it? I just take it as a reason that I should just rush headlong into things for her. It's a fortune waiting to be told." Now he laughs. From what I can tell about the guy, that reason *does* seem strangely like him. Satisfied, I pick up the duffel bag and sling it over my shoulder. I'm going to need to run soon.

"Thanks," I say with some awkwardness. "Oh, almost forgot. We haven't introduced ourselves, right? The name's Tomoe Enjō. You are?" I know that he already knows my name, but I say it anyway just so he's forced to say his.

"Mikiya Kokutō." The same name Ryōgi once mentioned in passing.

"Hah. She's right. Your surname *does* sound like the name of some poet I heard somewhere." We shake hands, and through it, I hand a certain key to him; the key to Ryōgi's room that I didn't need any more. From where I stand, it almost looks like the similarly tiny piece of metal I once treasured.

"What's this?" he asks.

"Just take it. It's you who needs to keep it safe from now on." I try my best to make a genuine smile. I don't know if I did. "When this is all over, we shouldn't meet again. Don't even try to find each other. Liking the same girl is reason enough to separate."

The guy raises an eyebrow and tries to say something, but cuts himself off. Maybe he does understand.

"So that's it," I continue. "I don't know you, and you don't know me. Which is why afterwards, we shouldn't worry about who died, and who

was responsible, and all that." I turn around and start to walk toward the manhole to start the whole thing. The guy sees me off. I turn around for the last time and wave my hand goodbye.

"See ya, buddy! I'm gonna start over once this is all done. I really love Ryōgi, but she doesn't need me. She's got you. I don't think you're particularly well-suited for each other, but hey, that's life, right? I was glad that I could meet someone like her, someone like me. It's why I know that guy's like you are what us nutjobs need."

I turn my back on him and sprint as hard and fast as my legs and lungs could carry me. I didn't look behind me ever again.

# Chapter 15

Waiting until the time he and Enjō agreed upon, Mikiya Kokutō finally sets foot for the second time on the building's grounds. The path that runs through the garden seems to be deserted. The grass in the garden surrounding the path is as rightly emerald green as grass should be, but strangely lacking its distinctive smell. He passes through it and into the lobby, bright with its electric lighting.

Not a sound can be heard. The fluorescent lights make no reflection off of the immaculate surfaces of the singularly cream colored walls and floor, yet the entire place leaves no corner or nook left unlighted. When Mikiya last came here, it was still morning, and he had felt a sort of tepid disquiet. But this night visit is different. It's almost as if the building is pregnant with a suffocating stillness. Every step he takes produces an echo: minute, almost unheard, only for the sound to vanish into oblivion less than a second later. Now, the silence is chilling, oppressive, and close to being physically thick, making Mikiya's every step heavy. Like the building recognizes his foreign nature and works to expel him.

Still, he is decided, and can't back down now, not when there are people counting on him. Forcing his way through the thickness of the air, he proceeds through the lobby.

"Guess I should start with the third floor," he mutters. He decides not to use the stairs, as using the elevator would probably attract more attention, leaving Enjō to do the work he needed. So he pushes the up button beside the elevator door, and hears the low howling of the machine's activation. The lights above the door indicate that it's descending from the fifth floor. Before long, the door starts to open silently, quite a contrast to its noise just moments before.

But even as the elevator door is starting to open, Mikiya already sees someone inside it. Without really knowing yet who it is, he gulps and takes a step back.

"Ah, so you've come. What perfect timing, too. I was just thinking of paying a visit to your master's sanctum," says the man in the blood red coat as a smile slowly spreads across his face. He steps out of the elevator with teetering steps, and holds something in one hand. His attention is solely affixed on it, facing it with an expression halfway between dread and joy. Mikiya looks at it, only to find a disgusting lump rising up in his throat. But he can't look away from it.

"It is so perfect, is it not?" the man asks mockingly. "I think it has utterly

captured my heart." Now he laughs in apparent enjoyment as he flaunts the object he is holding. And still Mikiya can't look away from it.

For the object the red coated man is holding in one hand is the head of Tōko Aozaki.

Tōko's head is remarkably well preserved for the state it's in. The flesh still holds some sort of living warmth, and it looks unchanged from when it was still alive. Their eyes closed in seeming slumber, and the untainted face look straight out of a painting, like she's returned to some purer state of being. Except of course for the fact that she's lost everything from the neck down.

With a hand pressed over his mouth, Mikiya tries to fight a losing battle against his urge to vomit, but it's not going all too well.

"How admirable of you to have come to take revenge for your mentor. Aozaki must have inspired great loyalty in such a lowly apprentice for you to trouble yourself so. To be honest, it makes me jealous." The smile in Alba's face seems warped and distorted, as though it was a smile carried too far in the service of showmanship. "Obviously, your mentor has passed from us. But not completely. Oh no. She yet has ears to hear, nerves to feel, and a mind with which to understand. It is a mercy, to be sure. I did many things in the service of destroying this woman, and I intend to express my gratitude to her. No, I will have her cling to life for a while more, at least."

He draws closer to Mikiya, each step a shuffle and a stomp, drunk in his own triumph. "Why, you might ask?" he hisses. "Because after years of defeat from this woman, it feels refreshing to finally become her better. Just killing her outright would be an insult to all the time leading up to this moment, an act better than she deserves. She will have to feel pain. Oh, don't worry yourself, friend. She's lost her entire body. She's got much more serious problems to deal with than a little pain, I'm sure."

Alba then lays the fingers of his other hand in Tōko's face in a gentle caress. Then he takes two fingers and, with a sudden thrust, inserts them forcefully into both eye sockets, forcing fresh blood out as he draws out the familiar eyeballs from their now open cavities. The cheeks of Tōko's face are bathed in streams of red tears. Separated from their owner and soaked in her own blood, the eyeballs look different and alien to Mikiya now. Only two globular pieces of meat. Alba holds out the hand holding the eyeballs toward Mikiya, gesturing for him to take it.

"You see?!" the red-coated man says in a half-crazed shout. "That must have hurt, but she didn't even make a sound! But worry not, for she still

feels pain as surely as we do. Her mind tells her so. Aozaki was always a stubborn one, but I wonder how she feels about her eyes being gouged out? Does it hurt, Aozaki? Enough to make you cry blood, evidently." He turns his attention away from the head and back to Mikiya. "You! What do you think? You're her apprentice so you must understand how she feels. Well? Can you?!"

Mikiya doesn't answer him. The scene is enough to numb him to inaction, let alone think anything except how to process the spectacle before him and how to survive this encounter. Alba looks on, affirming his satisfied look with a chuckle.

"In truth, however, I would have wanted to make her suffer not just pain, but the humiliation of being reduced to her current state. No matter. I can do something better anyway, but I need you." He looks back at Mikiya again. "I wonder, how would you feel if something you'd built, cherished, and cared for is destroyed right before your very eyes, as you sit there, helpless and unable to even scream. If it were me, I certainly wouldn't be able to take it. Not even killing the person who did it would be enough, oh no. Do you see it now, Aozaki?" He turns back to Tōko's head. "I want you, who has only given me indifference, to feel enough hatred to want to kill me. The best revenge I could hope for. Though Alaya has robbed me of the role of plunging my arms deep into your breast and pulling out your heart, this opportunity is still more than I deserve!"

As he continues to talk to the severed head, he suddenly grabs it with both of his hands, and returns his attention to Mikiya. "The moment I discovered Aozaki had an apprentice, I was so happy I couldn't contain myself. I've had my eye on you since we met. Curse not me but your mentor for making you known to me. Ah, but worry not. You will not join her just yet in hell. Though I said this head yet lives, we have reached the point where we must first make a small adjustment—"

He grins as wide as he can muster. Then, with a great force, he takes the severed head in between his two hands and squeezes it as a vise would. In only a few moments, the thing that was Tōko Aozaki compresses, blood pouring out of fissures in the skin from Alba's strong grip, until finally it is shattered into an unrecognizable pile of meat and blood that falls to the ground.

"—Tada! And now she's dead! It's magic!" And then the red-coated man laughs with a vigor that fills the once silent lobby.

Without a word, Mikiya books it, the sickening display repeating itself in his mind and burning away any sense or reason he still clung to. Not thinking where to go, he directed himself to the east building's lobby. His

mind can't bring up the memory of the last time he went there, or the details of the room. It is, in fact, a supreme effort for him to just keep from screaming.

"It's time to end this show, I think!" Alba calls after him. "Don't worry! You will follow soon enough!" His laughter fades, and he starts to follow after Mikiya at a leisurely pace, the hands swinging at his sides dripping with fresh blood and scraps of meat.

The sewer twists and turns, mazelike in its complexity. With no light in place to guide him, and only the steady flow of the sewage to return his mind to the passage of time, Tomoe wanders the dank passages. Luckily, Mikiya gave Tomoe everything he needed, including a map of the sewer infrastructure and a flashlight. Eventually, through these, he manages to reach the place where he's supposed to be in. Above him now lies the manhole he needs. He turns off the flashlight and sets the duffel bag down leaning on the wall, careful not to let it be carried away by the stream of sewage. He fishes around for a crowbar from the bag, and then climbs the ladder steps embedded into the sewer wall, going up a height he can't determine.

Tomoe's head hits something metallic, which is all the sign he needs. He feels around with one hand for the gap he needs to slide the crowbar into, then inserts the hook end into it carefully. Finding purchase, he pushes to open the gap wider. Then, with what strength he can muster, he pushes with his shoulder until the cover finally gives way, flipping across the floor with a hard metallic gong. He sticks his head out of the whole to find the entire parking lot similarly dark. Satisfied, Tomoe goes back down to retrieve the bag, then climbs back up and tosses it up first. Next comes Shiki's sword, then finally himself.

Without a light to guide his bearing, he pauses for a moment to listen to his surroundings. A strange feeling steals its way into him: that of being there no threat to actually discover him even as he sneaks around. The feeling of complacency. Though with the vastness of the parking lot, coupled with the darkness, Tomoe should have every reason to be comfortable in that feeling. From somewhere nearby, he hears the sharp hissing of steam echoing through the vast emptiness.

"The sound...of steam?" he whispers to himself as recalls something vague in his mind he thought he'd cast away. This particular darkness and the smell in the air are both known to Tomoe. Worse, they are *familiar*, tinged with the feeling of stepping over the threshold of one's house.

His bones ache as if in response to that familiarity, and the sound of their trembling is worsened by his mind, replaying them over and over again. He studies his perimeter yet again, and this time finds a beacon glow in the distance, a warm orange light that calls to him. When Tomoe sees it, he suddenly feels hot, as if his mind just caught up to the real temperature of the room. His feet draw him closer to the orange light in the center of everything, and he starts to hear the faint sound of the hissing noise he'd heard before.

As Tomoe edges deeper into the room, his eyes start to adjust to the darkness. Along the walls to his side are large canisters, arranged in an order he can't yet discern. The floor is littered with long, narrow tubes that lead to somewhere undetermined. And still, not a soul makes its presence known. The company Tomoe keeps now is only the sound of rising steam, and the noise of water boiling, both of which are getting increasingly louder with each step toward the center of the room. Both noises echoing in the confines of Tomoe's past.

Saying nothing, he walks with a heavy pace that matches his body's sudden weight. He is nearing the limits of his stamina. He is closer to the glow now, now able to see where it emanates from: a glowing hot metallic plate. Every so often in regular intervals, an amount of water is set to pour on top of it, boiling it and turning it instantaneously into a mist of steam floating up to the ceiling. The ceiling itself, as far as Tomoe can see, is filled with a complex series of pipes absorbing the steam and funneling it into the canisters in the sides of the room through which they are connected. A respiratory system.

Tomoe unconsciously does a nervous laugh as he sees this, and his curiosity takes him to the prominently displayed canisters. There are countless numbers of them, each about a head big. Though he can't see them just yet, Tomoe notices that something is floating within the formaldehyde solution contained within the canisters. And finally he sees them.

Brains. Human brains.

The tubes he had seen before on the floor are the same ones in the ceiling, spreading their length around the room but all ultimately connected to one canister, and all ultimately leading upwards and through the ceiling of the underground parking lot. *Probably connected to all the other rooms in the apartment buildings*, thinks Tomoe.

"Like a cheap dime novel horror," he remarks quietly with a smile, and then walks along the perimeter of the wall. He should have thought of it before. There was no way the people here lived the same yesterday, down to the detail, every day of the month. It'd only be cause for suspicion to

anyone outside looking in too closely, which Alaya obviously didn't want. Instead, they will have small changes, little details that change every day. But the day, for the most part, progressed in a similar spiral. A time to wake up, a time to eat, a time to play, a time to work, and a time to die and live again. And for this, they needed them to be, on some level, alive. Though Tomoe finds it hard to conceive of the situation—bodies animated by remotely stored human minds—that is what he beholds before him. Every day these minds are forced to live a closed loop of impermanent death and uncertain rebirth, living only to die in the night, experiencing it with the disconnect that comes from the mind and body being separate. A particular brand of hell if Tomoe ever saw one: A prison for the soul made to resemble some crude facsimile of life that didn't get the point, repeating the same dream until the sleepers can no longer distinguish dream from reality. Like the nightmare that kept plaguing Tomoe Enjō every night.

Tomoe brushes his fingers lightly on the cold surface of one of the canisters. "Hah...I see how it is now," he mutters, as the canister sends a chill running from his arm to his body. At that moment he hears a voice—no, not a voice; more akin to a communicating consciousness, emanating from the object. Did he imagine it? Regardless, it communicates only one thing.

*Save me.*

Tomoe chuckles despite the intrusion in his mind. After all, what could he save? Does it want to return to its original form, or perhaps escape from the cycle it's trapped in? Either way, both are impossible tasks.

"All I've proven I can do is kill," says Tomoe, amused at his own irritatingly cheerless observation. "Besides, even I wanted to be saved. Problem was, I didn't know what I wanted to be saved from. Probably better that way, since there was no way to save me in the end, even if we stretch the meaning of the word. I've had the impulse to kill boiling up inside me from the start, and now I'm past the point where saving mattered," he utters almost apologetically.

Now, Tomoe sets about rummaging among the canisters scattered along the wall, trying to find the one that curiosity and logic tells him he should be able to find. The lack of it would be even more strange than its presence. The mage Alaya didn't kill anyone to procure these brains for his sick experiment, only harvested them after their owners all did the deed to each other. That's why the one thing that is the source for Tomoe Enjō's repeating dream—or the reality that occurred half a year ago—should lie somewhere in this pile. And sure enough, within a few short minutes, he finds the canister he was looking for. He didn't want it to exist, but everything pointed to it, and now, he doesn't know what to feel.

He smiles a twisted smile as he touches it gently, fascinated as one would be when looking at a mirror that reflects him twisted and wrong. Finally, the proof is laid out before him. He looks upon himself. Two tubes extend out of it. One reaches upward to the ceiling, but the other is cut. A faulty machine, a discarded piece of equipment thrown out from the comforting safety of the regularity it once knew.

At that point, almost on cue, a sharp sound breaks through the repetitive sound of the steam, and Tomoe looks to its source: the left elbow that had pained him most among the other parts of his body since yesterday. From there, he casts his eyes downward, and he sees what made the sound.

His left arm, elbow to fingertips, fallen to the floor.

He never felt it slough off. Blood red liquid oozes and drips from the newly torn limb. He looks inside the cavity of what remains of his arm, and sees that among the things that look like skin and bone contained within, it also sports objects seemingly shaped like cogs and gears. They tick, louder and more incessantly now, like an annoying clock, the sound of them strangely familiar, and almost comforting. A sound he has heard on many an occasion beforehand. Tomoe hears the ticking as some old memory, like another name for him, asserting what he really is: the person who killed his mother to ward off a nightmare, and, dancing to the invisible strings, ran from his act in shame is

“...me.”

Tomoe’s mind blanks, and he cannot prevent himself from falling to the floor on his knees. He giggles quietly, privately, but then it builds to the boisterous yet disturbing laugh of a madman, reverberating across the expanse of the empty parking lot.

“This is ridiculous,” Tomoe says with difficulty. “Right from the start, right from the fucking start, I was already a phony.”

He cannot think of anything else. Only the revelation that, on some level he had always known, fills him with a laugh of self-ridicule he can no longer contain.

*It’s was all bullshit,* Tomoe thinks to himself. *I...me and my family had zero chance of avoiding that tragedy, even if we repeated the damn act a million times. We had no way of changing how it all would end. We’re all just fakes, manipulated by Alaya. He knew I couldn’t do anything, and let me run.*

The ceaseless ticking in his arm and the multitude of ethereal voices from each mind crying out to him for help are all infuriatingly annoying. Irritating. Making him lose concentration. A maddening cacophony forcing him to slip away from the solid truth that he had just learned, the truth he

sought for so long: that everything is a lie. In desperation, he edges closer to the glowing metal plate in the center of the room, the voices getting louder every second. He raises his torn off left arm and presses it onto the searing hot surface of the metal plate.

Tomoe screams an animal scream, a guttural noise of anguish beyond comprehension. The stump of his left arm sizzles and smokes. The blood stops flowing, the wound cauterized. The ticking fades. The voices are slowly silenced. The pain shoots well through his entire arm and fires up seemingly every nerve in his body. But it is only for a few precious moments. Afterward, he raises his arm from the metal plate, traces of burnt flesh coloring its edges. He may have already gone mad. But—at least for now—he finds resolve, and remembers the real reason he has come back to this place of madness.

Gasping for breath and sweating harder than he ever had before, Tomoe searches desperately for the elevator and finally finds it in a corner of the room. The light indicates it has stopped in the first floor. He pushes the up button and calls the machine down. Double checking the knife in his pocket, and slinging the sword over the shoulder of his good arm, he goes inside. He looks back over his shoulder at the room that challenged him, the room now filled only with the disturbing regularity of the sound of the water and the hiss of steam, and blanketed otherwise by silence so total that no one except the sleeping, dreaming souls wrapped in their lie of a life may hear the final moments of one who would die here.

*Which is the real spiral: the never-changing life, or the never-ending life? This building is a machine that is wrapped in both sides of infinity, where even dying isn't a permanent setup. You just get free do-overs the next day. It's a perfectly maintained cycle. I wonder if the cycle had some kind of flaw, would my mother still have killed me? Would I still kill my mother? It's an impossible question to answer. It wouldn't be the same life. This entire place is built on the death of others. Without that, this place has no meaning.*

Still, how I wish this spiral had a paradox.

He makes an impossible wish with no answer. Tomoe feels his entire body screaming towards its final hour, but he still manages to push the button to take him to the tenth floor.

Mikiya Kokutō keeps running as hard as he can, past the point where his breathing can keep up. He spares no moment to look back and see if Alba is following him. Finally, he finds that his feet have taken him inside the east

wing lobby, and he stops.

A dead end? He thinks, incredulous. Sure enough, aside from the stairs that leads to the second floor balcony, the place has nowhere else to go except where he came from. Stopping here, and realizing that Alba isn't following him with the same urgency with which he is fleeing, gives him the moment he needs to collect himself and focus.

*Crap, why did I have to up and panic like that?* Though he thought he was prepared for anything they might throw at him, he was evidently not prepared for the sight of the head of the very friend he was joking with just yesterday to be destroyed right in front of him. *Relatively speaking, I handled that much the same way anyone would.* Still, both his knees are trembling not just from nervousness but the strain of having to run at a pace he wasn't used to, and he has to press down on them with both hands to calm down.

*For now, I need to find some way to get away from him.* He quickly scans the lobby, turning in all directions. As he does this, he hears the heavy echo of footsteps coming from the corridor he just went through.

*This is bad.* Mikiya starts running again, more composed this time. He makes a break for the stairs, having nowhere else to go, but no sooner has he climbed three steps when he hears a sharp, keening sound that lasts barely a second. At almost the same time, his feet lose their purchase on the floor, somehow deprived of what strength he had forced into them and forcing him to fall on the stairs on his knees. He reaches out with his hand toward the railing, seeking to use it to raise himself up, but fails. He slips downwards, back to the first floor, and collapses side first on to the staircase. Quickly, he looks at his legs and finds a dark red stain spreading downward in his slacks, originating from his knees. *They've been pierced by something from behind,* he observes now with a kind of detachment, as though it is another person's knees he is examining. He feels no pain. Not just yet. The adrenaline is working its magic, so the wounds feel more hot than painful.

"Easy now, young man. Can't have you breaking your neck falling on the stairs, now can we? I have plans for you. Fortunately, that spell was only enough to stop you, and not burst your knees open at the seams." Alba comes walking, arms spread wide in a sick sort of welcome.

Mikiya says nothing, only trying to crawl his way up the stairs even as the wound has his undivided attention. Despite what Alba said, the blood is pouring out of the wounds as fast as spilled drink. Slowly, though he doesn't realize it yet, Mikiya's consciousness is fighting a losing battle.

"You are a conjurer, or summoner, or a worker of familiars much like

your mentor, are you not? Then call your pets forth, or suffer the shame of being unworthy of the moniker of a mage." When Mikiya does nothing, Alba frowns.

"Hmph. It seems our dear Aozaki was not as good a mentor to you as I thought. But I expected nothing less from her, as she is full of such flaws. The story of how she the Ordo granted her title is one such example. The Ordo grants the titles of color to the mages they deem with the most potential. I know that 'Ao' in Japanese means 'blue,' and true to her surname, Aozaki desired this rank, this highest of honors. But the Ordo judged her unworthy of it, instead granting it to her younger sister, who was deemed her family's rightful successor, and snatched everything away from her. Aozaki entered the Collegium to best her sister in the Art, but even here, she is defeated. Ironically, she was given the title of 'Red.' But because the 'Tō' in her name means orange, I think it is even more appropriate for her! A color that seems completely unable to own up to her title of Red. It was perfect!"

Alba reaches the foot of the stairs looming above the immobile Mikiya while wearing a smile of supreme satisfaction.

"Count yourself lucky that you meet your end in the same place as your mentor. Being Aozaki's apprentice, I thought that you would make a sport of yourself. Alas, you were nothing but a disappointment." He takes a knee beside Mikiya, and extends a hand slowly towards his face. In contrast to Alba's leisurely movement, Mikiya's arm suddenly springs into action.

"Wha—" Alba's surprise lasts for only a moment. But it is the only moment Mikiya needs to exploit. His upper body moves, bringing a hand from under him, brandishing a silver knife that he had hidden beneath his jacket. It is the silver paper opener of Tōko Aozaki, brought by Mikiya just in case, but thinking he would never need to use it. Now he closes his eyes shut and thrusts it toward Alba.

It's the first time in his life he's ever had any murderous intent and actually carried it out. It is a feeling foreign to him, and for that reason he closed his eyes so as not to see the entire thing directly. The solid feeling in his hands tells him that the knife has struck home against...something, certainly. For sure, he knew the red-coated man was unprepared, then cursed but was cut short. He couldn't have dodged a strike at such close quarters.

Hoping that he hadn't inflicted a wound too serious, Mikiya opens his eyes. His fading consciousness blurs his vision for a moment until it resolves into a coherent image...of Alba looming before him with his outstretched hand, the knife stuck quite deeply and straight in the center of that same hand's palm. His grin is wider than ever.

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It is only a small moment of incredulity for Mikiya. But it passes like an hour.

“What a bad boy you are to do such a thing to me,” Alba spits out mockingly. “It’s only fun until someone loses an eye.” As he says this, he extends his other hand to Mikiya, this time with haste. He grabs Mikiya by the face, holds it tight, raises it slightly, then slams it down onto the steps of the stairs. The back of Mikiya’s head makes a dull sound in the impact. Losing no time, he raises Mikiya’s head again, and slams it back down again. And again. And again. Each time, repeating the same phrase.

“Fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun!” Each accompanied by the same dull thud, both sounds resounding in the vastness of the lobby. Mikiya’s grip on the knife loosens as he loses consciousness. Eventually, even his breath falls lighter and more desperate. At this, Alba finally stops and stands up.

“Ah, what a pain. A pain such that would have made me cry. I would have wanted to let you live, but I’m sure you wouldn’t be able to bear the shame of it.” He extracts the bloodied knife from his hand as if brushing off a leaf, and nods to himself and his own words in approval. “Well, I do believe I’ve done what I’ve set out here to do. Though I do have a passing interest in Alaya’s little experiment, I do believe I should be getting back to Germany. The air here in Japan is not good for me, you see,” he says to the unmoving Mikiya. Alba turns away from the body, and starts walking away, heading for the corridor that leads back to the central lobby.

But before he is able to do so, he hears something he doesn’t expect. Another set of footsteps echoing from that same corridor; high-pitched falls, the sound of which is recognizable to him. He, in fact, heard them only yesterday.

“Impossible.”

But he has no time to think, and soon enough, the origin of those footsteps stands in the lobby, large suitcase in tow. Now, as before, Tōko Aozaki blocks his way.

## Chapter 16

"Spare us the hackneyed lines of 'but you should be dead,' Cornelius. You're a mage. You know all about bodies. About containers. About the creation of life and the granting of sentience. Don't disappoint me," Tōko Aozaki says with a bitter tenderness. Alba is silent and has his eyes affixed only on her. On his hands can be seen a faint trembling.

Tōko drops her bag on the marble floor with an accompanying "That should do it." The bag is the only thing that proves to be different. Her face, her eyes, her hair, the smug smile she wears; all the same. Only the bag has changed. Yesterday it was just a smallish briefcase, but this one is far bigger. One you'd take on a trip, and where you could conceivably hide a small child in.

"I came as fast I could," Tōko says, "but from the looks of things, I guess I didn't make it in time. I believe I made it clear that Kokutō isn't my apprentice, but you just wouldn't listen. Never taught him a thing about the Art. And in case you're wondering, nope, I haven't changed one iota."

"But—but you should be dead! I snuffed the life out of you with my bare hands!" Alba shouts, seemingly oblivious to what Tōko is saying. He curls his hands into fists to stop himself from trembling. In his mind he is equal parts unbelieving, mad, and fearful, though he tries his best to hide it. Tōko is placid and continues to refuse meeting Alba's bloodshot stare, choosing instead to retrieve a pack of cigarettes from her pocket.

Alba watches her every move from where he is. The more the figure before him continues to act like the Tōko he knows, the chill in his spine grows ever worse. Unable to contain himself, he cries out to Tōko. "You can't be here. It's a mistake. Yes! Some sort of mistake! You're lost on the way to your next life. The dead should not linger in this world. **Begone, spectre!**"

He raises a blood-soaked hand, the same hand that Mikiya stabbed. His blood and the blood of Tōko's pulverized head are coming together in a mix of red for red. He swings this hand in a wide arc in front of him, splattering wet blood all around. As the scattered liquid flies through the air, they combust and burst into sizeable flames in flight like gasoline. All of his remaining malice, he hurls toward Tōko in that desperate weaving of the Art.

The flames whip in arcs and try to wrap around Tōko, but in an instant, she moves her own hand, as if to pull the flames in. Sure enough, the fire is drawn to her hand, where it comes to a halt right before it. Palm open and

the concentrated flame hovering above it, Tōko uses it to light the cigarette in her mouth, and by waving it away with a casual disdain, the flames are dispelled.

"Hey, Cornelius, if you don't want dead men and women in this building then I suggest you file a complaint with this apartment's owner. Knock the act off already, can't you tell I'm the real deal? Pretty big difference between the dead and the living. Like cigarettes." She takes in a satisfied puff, and frowns. "For example, I can tell that this one's some bad stuff," Tōko chuckles.

The casualness with which he throws away her comments finally makes Alba realize that the person before him is indeed a living thing, unchanged from the original. But that only makes him repeat the same question, not in disbelief, but due to being unable to understand. So he repeats.

"But you should be dead," he says, a note of dejection in his voice. The words force a frown on Tōko's face, leaving unsaid her displeasure in the trite line, allowing her amber eyes to make her point.

"Technically, Cornelius, I did die. Body virtually destroyed, soul severed from the flesh, the whole shebang."

"Then explain your being here!"

She sighs. "I thought that would have been obvious. I'm the replacement, fresh out of the package," she says, no absurdity finding its way into her voice. The statement leaves the red-coated mage blank, mouth half open.

"What do you mean a 'replacement?' Are you a puppet when you can be revived so easily? Or maybe—" Alba starts to think of other possibilities, other well-kept lore and arcana of the Art.

The puppets that mages create can never match with the human façade. It can move as a man would, but it will expose itself soon enough, through speech, or action, or appearance; something that seems off or wrong in its creation, *something* that exposes its true nature. That, and the parts that make it tick are not truly alive, only clever mechanisms animated by the Art. A loss of limb—exposing blood and muscle sinew—will reveal it.

*The Art cannot create an automaton that contains the spark of humanity.* An old mage saying from the Middle Ages, passed down to become common knowledge. Eventually it became almost a rule. Yet despite this, the woman standing in front of Alba is certainly human. Certainly some kind of replica, but completely lacking the distinctive tell that gives away the fakery of all puppets. Which, to Alba, can only mean that this woman is the real Tōko Aozaki.

"Now I see it! Then the one I killed is surely the fake!"

"Just keep lying to yourself, Cornelius. That also means that the mage that bested you yesterday was nothing more than a pale imitation of me, correct?"

"Hmph. Fine, then that was the real thing. But here we have a paradox. You're saying both are real. How do you explain this inconsistency away?!" Alba cries out to Tōko. But from the look on his face after he says it, it seems he solved the answer by himself. He shakes his head rapidly, still doubting, still thinking it impossible. But how else can he explain it? Can it be possible? "Aozaki, don't tell me you're—"

"Ding ding. Both the one you fought yesterday, and the me standing before you today, are fakes. I don't even know the point that the real became the fake. I don't even know if it matters anymore." The mage in the orange trench coat dons a cruel grin.

"Then what are you? Not an original? Was there even an original? But you call yourself Tōko Aozaki, don't you? With a soul to work the Art, and granted sentience! But all the puppets granted fleeting sentience up to this point have been unable to grasp the existential dilemma of their artificial nature, and end up terminating themselves. How do you break the rules? How do you continue to function?!"

"Everything before me was but second rate sentience, I'd say. I really don't see the need for how scared you are right now, Cornelius. You call me fake, yet there's only one Tōko Aozaki. As a parting gift, I'll even tell you how that came to be. Maybe it'll be a good learning experience." Losing a bit of her calm façade, she finally meets Alba's eye to eye.

"Listen, Cornelius. The me you're seeing right now is something I kept in my sanctum. It activated itself once you killed Tōko Aozaki. Only been an hour since. I am a mage that traffics in pawns and puppets, so I experiment on them as well. In one of these experiments, I crafted my foremost creation: a perfect puppet imitation of me. No more, and no less than myself. I looked on it, and allowed my thoughts to wander. I thought that having created such a thing, maybe there is no longer any need for me."

As the puppeteer relates the story to her like a layperson to a priest, Alba gulps. He can't believe his ears. Heresy to the laws of the Ordo Magi, pure and simple. Why would she not be happy that she achieved this, instead of throwing away her existence?

"Ridiculous," Alba spits out. "In the end, what you created couldn't be anything more than an automaton. Assuming you could even make such a thing as you described in the first place. And if you have indeed performed it, then why does it not...why do *you* not seek ascension? Why do you not aim higher? Mages are never satisfied by the status quo. We seek, manipu-

late, create, and destroy only for the final step in that ladder.”

“Hey, you’re looking at the state of the art of the Art here, and even when I was gone, it still went on doing the same thing I did. How does that give any puppeteer hope for ascension?”

“But it’s all just supposed to be theory! I wouldn’t allow myself to be cast aside for something new, yet similar to me. Even if it was an achievement that would make my name ring throughout the history of the Art, it is not enough. I must be there to observe it, or else there is no meaning!” Alba screams incoherently as he wraps his arms around himself as if it would protect him from something he didn’t quite yet know. Anyone can discern the difference now between the two mages; between the one who preoccupied himself on the matters of revenge, and the mage that threw herself away for the path of gnosis. But Alba refuses to acknowledge it.

“Call it a difference of opinion and philosophy, Alba. Still, no need to blame yourself. To tell you the truth, I’m sort of jealous of you, actually. I don’t know when I became the way I am. I don’t even know which of me was real anymore. I just woke up when the previous me died. The soul remembers everything, and it’s all there in my head, everything I know. Determinism and entropy kinda says that I take the same action as my predecessor would. After all this, maybe I’ll make another puppet to convince myself that I’m the real thing. The real thing might be the one you killed. It might already be dead. But it’s all the same thing, isn’t it? No way to distinguish us. It’s a quantum superposition like that cat in the box problem. No one’s ever gonna know. But I think what’s important right now for you and me is the fact that I’m here, and that for now, for all intents and purposes, I’m Tōko Aozaki, and if it brings you any measure of comfort, you can think of the one you killed as the fake. We clear? Good! Now we can get down to real business.”

She reaches down for the bag she’d placed on the floor. Alba stares at her opponent, more terrified of her revelation than if she had woven a dozen curses at him. “That’s right,” he says in a low voice. “That’s why Alaya kept you alive. As long as you remained alive, the next iteration of you wouldn’t trigger and come alive.”

Tōko keeps her silence now, only maintaining her harsh glance at the red-coated mage. Alba had long since stopped trying to hold back his trembling. For him, the cold grows stronger as he looks into Tōko’s sterile eyes. He sees no warmth in that amber color, only an efficient intent to kill buried inside them. He never knew Tōko to look like the way she did now. Not even in their time in the Collegium did she show anything as blood-thirsty as she is at this moment.

And Alba comes to the idea that, for him, the Tōko he had known until now was the only real one. Not this cold, standing figure that hides so many secrets even from herself. No, not this side of her that is the ruthless mage that is peer to none. And as he entertains such thoughts, he finds what reason for revenge he holds start to become less significant, less pressing. For he didn't know what monster he had aligned himself against, or if he really hated it. Because, at the very least, the Tōko Aozaki *he* knew was very much different.

"Are you real?" he whispers one last time like a confession. Tōko snickers.

"Now what meaning does that question have on something like me?" she hisses, her face a portrait of sweetly ringing malice.

Tōko brings the cigarette held between her fingers back to her mouth. "Now, let's return to our more pressing problems," she says as she puffs out gray smoke from her mouth. "You hurt my friend pretty badly with your teasing. Probably didn't even notice the hour go by."

Alba, for his part, does indeed remember Tōko saying that it took her an hour to get here. He looks at the boy collapsed at the foot of the stairs. The wounds in his knees remain unchanged. But mysteriously, the wounds in his head and the blood that those wounds are supposed to have spawned are gone.

"What—what manner of sorcery have you done, Aozaki?" Alba asks feebly. All the bluster of his earlier displays have left him, and whatever will he had left to attack Tōko is gone in the face of her greater proficiency.

"Tsk tsk. We mages shouldn't use that word so lightly. Remember: this is the third time I've been in this lobby. The first time I was here, I placed my own spell. On a delayed trigger, if you will. A little trick I placed in advance that I could play in tonight's party. Think back to the time of your surprise when our boy Kokutō here lunged at you with the knife."

"That was the trick?" Alba moans in regret, remembering that exact time. There is a void in his memory, something missing that connects what happened before and after the boy's attack on him. A momentary lapse? Some illusion the puppet master had set up beforehand that manipulated his perception? He laughs in futility.

"So I was playing right into your hands from the very start, you witch. You must have enjoyed yourself immensely, Aozaki. Though I am loathe to admit it, I must have seemed quite the fool."

"Oh, don't blame yourself overmuch. After all, I never thought I'd end up

dying. Rest easy, though. I didn't come here again to pay back that particular act, but for something else. That you and Kokutō happened to be here is a mere convenience." Tōko gives a slight nudge to the bag placed beside her feet and makes it fall to the ground. Or roll over, more like. Its shape is approximately that of a cube, and its size intimidatingly large.

"If you are not here for revenge, then what is your purpose?" Alba asks. "To stop Alaya's mad attempts at experimenting with the Art, no doubt."

"Not by a long shot. Why should I when that thing takes care of itself? No, Alba. My business is with you alone."

As though he'd arrived at the same conclusion, Alba nods. But, he wonders, why him if Tōko says she bears him no ill will, or any intent to interfere in Alaya's experiments? Why does she look so tensed and prepared on spilling blood? "Why? I've done nothing else to you," he says in protest.

"Nothing much more than a trifle. I mean, I've pretty much gotten over your irrational hatred of me. To tell you the truth, I rather preferred it that way ever since our time in the Collegium together. It was proof that I was always better."

"Then why?!"

"Still don't remember? It's a very simple reason: you called me by a moniker far too old to be funny." The sound of Tōko's suitcase opening rings out in the lobby, and within it Alba can only see a dark mass which somehow remains untouched by all the light. And within that there are two things—

"Come now, recall those words in the Collegium," Tōko declares. "Recall the name "Wild Red." Recall how I swore to destroy anyone who said it. And how I did."

—two lights—or two eyes.

And upon seeing it, Alba finally understands. He chastises himself belatedly for not realizing it sooner. This is a box for sealing magical familiars inside, similar to what Tōko used before, only larger. And the creature in it now, whatever it is, emerges from the seemingly infinite depths of the box with baffling speed to capture Cornelius Alba with thorn-lined tendrils. He feels a thousand tiny mouths chewing and consuming him in small portions as he is dragged into the box, being eaten alive. When only his head and neck remain visible, Alba and the puppetmaster's eyes meet for the last time before he is completely consumed. Her eyes are eyes of laughter. And he finally realizes his foolishness in ever thinking that he could rival such a monster. He remembers Alaya's last words to him. Perhaps he should have seen this coming after all. The last thoughts in the mind of a mage slowly being eaten.

## Chapter 17

Tomoe Enjō leans on the cold walls of the confined, claustrophobic elevator as it slowly moves upward. He stares blankly into space even though his breath becomes more ragged every moment. Ever since he cauterized the stump of his arm to stop the bleeding, his arm nerves haven't stopped sending signals of pain. Knowing that his mind and body are both in the worst possible conditions, he is unable to think straight, his mind hazy and blank. It takes him serious concentration to even keep his breathing at a manageable level.

He's only ridden this elevator one other time, but even now Tomoe can feel it moving slowly, taking its time climbing the chamber, and making him grow impatient. Carelessly, Tomoe drops the sword. The thud it makes hitting the floor wakes him back to concentration. It's heavier than he expected, and only an hour or so of having it slung across his shoulder has already made his arm numb. Lacking a second arm, he can't even draw it from its scabbard, let alone wield it effectively. So he takes out the knife in his pocket and grips it tight, thinking it a better weapon for his situation now.

Finally, the elevator stops. It's reached the tenth floor. When the door slides open, Tomoe steps outside and into the central lobby. Immediately in front of him is the corridor to the east building, and on the other side of the elevator chamber is the corridor to the west building, unseen from here. Tomoe starts walking towards the west building, where the lights are off and the real corpses are left in their places. He walks around the elevator chamber, sees and walks through the corridor, and comes out in the hallway that describes the circumference of the Ōgawa Apartments. In a few more minutes, Tomoe knows, it will soon be eleven o' clock in the evening.

Here in the hallway, the view of the outside world is quiet and lonely. All the apartments and condos surrounding this particular one all look about the same. Below, sporadic spots of garden greenery mixes with the dull dark grey of the asphalt. It makes the entire scene look less like an assemblage of high-rises and more like a cemetery and its gravestones writ large.

Though his attention is facing the night scenery outside, he is certain he feels the presence of a person somewhere nearby. So with deep breath, a bout of concentration, and a grip on the knife, he slowly turns toward the direction of the elliptical hallway, unlighted save for the faint blue glow of moonlight. There, separated from him by a distance of two rooms, stands

a figure wearing a black greatcoat. Though the light makes it difficult to make out, the person's height and silhouette leave little room for doubt. A lifetime of anguish has chipped away at the face. Standing here now is the mage, Sōren Alaya.

The moment Tomoe confronts Alaya, he freezes. For a moment, his breathing normalizes, his pain disappears, his consciousness is stilled, and all becomes silent. He stands there, unable to do anything. But he is glad for this because it is a moment of respite where he can redouble his purpose.

"Alaya!" Though he cannot do anything, and his freedom of movement is stripped away and limited, Tomoe speaks with confidence, invoking his opponent's name as a sort of proof of equality. Trepidation will not be his quality this time. Alaya's features seem to darken at this brazen act.

"Why have you returned?" the mage asks in his heavy set voice. Tomoe denies him an answer and only looks straight at him and his eyes that don't seem to take in any light. It is all he can do not to look away. "You have no place here. Your replacement has been readied, and your return was not a necessity."

*Why did I return? Tomoe thinks. Well, the first time was because Ryōgi brought me along for the ride. But now it's—*

"To save Shiki Ryōgi, is it?" Alaya asks mockingly. "Fool. Do not think your heart is a thing that belongs to you. If you have not realized it yet, you are a mere puppet. Do you find yourself unable to live, separated from this spiral?"

"Wh—"

"It is true that you escaped this spiral of an existence. The Tomoe who died, died due to the actions of his family. But that was not for you. You thought you escaped. You despaired. You even contemplated the thought of suicide, and you would have done so, left alone as you were. But you had a role to play in this stage as well. A role you were designed for. Tell me, do you know it?"

Tomoe wants to scream and cast off Alaya's lies, but cannot seem to summon the strength to do so. Instead, he stands there, unmoving. The mage's face is unchanged, the eyes still sneering and ridiculing his inaction as he continues.

"It was the final throw of the coin for me. And I succeeded, as you fulfilled your role better than my wildest expectations. Without knowing me, you brought Shiki Ryōgi here to her final act. Though I had the lowest expectations for you, you defied them. And though I reward you by removing the leash, it seems you must still come back. Make no mistake; you have no agency that I do not ultimately shape. You did not crave Shiki Ryōgi

out of your own will. I only appended one thing to your existence after your first escape: to draw in Shiki Ryōgi and bring her in clandestinely."

Unable to form a coherent argument against Alaya's words, Tomoe finds it difficult to remain standing. Because after all, he knows inside that it is true. How can someone like Tomoe, who had never truly loved a stranger before, suddenly find himself in love with Ryōgi? Ever since he first met her, he had already felt some inexplicable impulse driving him, telling him to observe her, and take interest in her.

"So you understand now, do you?" Alaya says. "You gave a reason for Shiki Ryōgi to come here, but the decisions were never yours. You are but a mere congregation of the memories of a single day in this pocket reality. Nothing before, and nothing after; your so-called will an illusion maintained by delusions. There is no other place for your simple life. For you are powerless, and as such, unlike the fantasies you entertain in your heart of hearts, you cannot hope to stop me." Now, as before, the mage's words are charged with the taint of magic.

The facts of his artificial origins, the one day of life lived over hundreds of days, and the delusion of the past he relied on and a future that he could hope for all come crashing into Tomoe's mind. His feelings toward Shiki, and toward his dead family, his humanity: all an artifice. Only the exits and entrances of the one day drama he had lived repetitively remains in a weak emanation. And even that, Tomoe wonders—even that cannot be trusted.

"In the end, you are not even worth my attention in watching you expire pathetically. Disappear, and never be seen again," Alaya says in a deep, commanding voice. He seems to lose interest in Tomoe after he said what he felt must be said, averting his eyes from the boy. But against the revelations that Alaya attacks him with, Tomoe offers only an unprecedented smile.

"The fuck you blabbing about? That shit isn't as important as you think it is to me," Tomoe says, but if it dealt any crack on the mage's demeanor, he does not make it visible. "Being here in front of you now, I get it. I didn't want to admit I was weak like you, but now I know I gotta face it. 'Sides, real or fake, doesn't matter in the end. What matters is what comes after it. 'Least I know that I'm Tomoe Enjō. Even if I got no past, what matters is that I think I do. And for me, it gives me all that I need." He chews with an empty mouth, but finds it helpful to his concentration. "I really liked Ryōgi. Fuck the reason. The ride was fun while it lasted, even though I couldn't give her anything. And if you say you're the reason for the whole thing, then I gotta be a gentleman and thank you, don't I?"

Tomoe clicks his tongue, remembering what he can of Shiki Ryōgi. It

seems like a different life now. At least every time he remembers her, the clicking of the gears and cogs that placed him in the circumstance of his life seem to fade away. *That Mikiya guy was right*, Tomoe thinks. *It's more important to think of myself sometimes*. He needed to come here. Shiki is only part of the reason. He had to know all that had been revealed to him tonight. Own up to the cost. Maybe find his own redemption in what little he can do. *But I still gotta do it.*

*Sorry about this, Ryōgi. Looks like I'm not dying for you after all. I'm putting my life on the line for my own self.* In his mind, the apology is a whisper, and with just that, the thought of Shiki Ryōgi departs from his mind.

"Call me a fake all you want, Alaya," Tomoe declares. Alaya's expression finally changes, though subtly, with the slight quiver of his brow.

"You would go against your nature? That way lies foolishness and hubris. It will never change the truth of you," he replies with disdain.

"Maybe. But at least my soul is true," Tomoe says with a quiet murmur, carried on the wind and echoing out through the night.

"The time for talk is long past."

Tomoe nods slowly and determinedly, secretly agreeing. The mage raises his hand in his familiar gesture, like a signal for his enemy's imminent demise. As soon as Tomoe sees this, he holds back the chattering in his teeth. He knows he will be killed. But at the very least, he can pay him back a few for the trouble. This isn't suicide to him. This is for the sake of his parents, and for the sake of the dead and dying in this spiral of a false world, and for his own sake as well. Tomoe doesn't want to die. But there are some things worth dying for. *Time to run. To run and face the truth. Run with the same joy in my memory. Run like the hands on a clock, or the changing seasons. Run so that I don't end up in the same place every time. Whether it's a dream that doesn't truly exist, it drives a determination that I know is real.*

"Alaya, I *will* kill you." Gripping the knife tight, Tomoe Enjō breaks into a sprint.

Tomoe Enjō aims to hit only one target: Sōren Alaya's heart. He'd seen Shiki strike the same place with a determined strike, and he thinks that repeating it might proffer the mage's death. And so, aiming at this, Tomoe runs, attempting to close the same six meter distance that Shiki once closed in a mere two or three seconds. He kicks off the floor with an explosion of strength, remembering the sprints he repeated over and over in the track

in school. He will make this his best time yet.

In the space around Alaya, a circular perimeter appears much like the one he deployed in his fight with Shiki. However, unlike the threefold circular ward that he used with Shiki, he only uses one, perhaps to mock Tomoe. This particular one only spreads out a meter away from the mage. Tomoe knows no way to avoid it, and so he steps right into it. With an arrested jerk, his body halts in place. The power that only moments ago flowed through Tomoe's legs is gone in one disorienting instant. He is immobile, unable to do anything.

Frowning, Alaya takes one sluggish pace forward, impressing upon Tomoe the gravity of the situation. His outstretched hand slowly takes hold of Tomoe's head. *No good huh*, thinks Tomoe as he closes his eyes. But he refuses to back down.

"My family didn't deserve to die like they did," Tomoe struggles to say. "They weren't so bad that they deserved to be killed!" he shouts. He fights the invisible chains that bind him as hard as he can, not caring even if his legs might be snapped in two, as long as it doesn't end like this. *I'm not worthless.*

"I existed! I've lived!" Tomoe cries as he pours his last burst of effort into escaping. He hears a snapping sound, then a sharp tear, and then the flash of pain of a leg splitting open. He starts to fall forward, but turns that momentum into his last attack. Passing under Alaya's arm, he lets his hand that holds the knife fly to the mage's defenseless chest, the steel glinting and seemingly leaving a cold, silver trail in the air. And it hits its mark. But that is the only thing that happens.

"You fool," Alaya says with a voice tinged with regret. He draws back his hand to seize Tomoe's head once again, unfazed by the strike at his chest. This time, his hold is solid, almost crushing.

"You are not Shiki Ryōgi, nor do you have her Eyes. You do not realize that the knowing of death is not enough, for there is value too in the seeing. You cannot hope to actualize my entropy without seeing it." Now the mage's muscular arm begins to crush the head which it holds. Tomoe's hand that wielded the knife is now forced to withdraw it from the mage's chest, slipping out easily and dropping to the floor in a clatter, the hand that only seconds ago gripped it tightly now losing its strength.

"You never knew the reason you were chosen," Alaya whispers sternly. Tomoe does not honor him with an acknowledgement. The hand seems to rob him of his last will to live. "In your last moments, you have earned this knowledge, so listen well. All things have an impetus that drives and shapes their very existence. A primal impulse contained and cycled in the

Akashic Record we mages call an ‘origin.’ I knew you would murder your mother, and fall into despair because your origin is known to me.”

Again, Tomoe does not answer. Alaya holds Tomoe’s body up high by the head, and with a voice far too chilling, speaks.

“Know this: you were never capable of anything. For your origin was ‘worthlessness.’”

In the flash of a moment, some arcane power, like a command, passes through Alaya’s hands. The power enters the body of Tomoe Enjō, and he begins to fade from existence completely, disintegrating into the air into nothingness.

After the destruction Tomoe Enjō, the mage Sören Alaya stands stock still in the tenth floor hallway. He knows the time is close at hand. He has prepared the body he will use, and his soul is ready to be relocated, and he will finally leave this inferior flesh. Unlike the puppet master he once knew, his soul will not move to something similar to his previous form. He has no need of one, for he has never known death. He has known rot and decay, but his soul presses him forward to some grand goal, and so he survives. And in the end, he stands alone. This body will either be his medium for ascension, or death; for there is no other. Due to this, his extreme attention to caution can perhaps be forgiven.

Not much longer now until he leaves this false material world, his soul sublimated to the vessel of the girl connected to the spiral of origin, from where he can command reality itself. As above, so below. The process has already started. But before this happens, there is one matter left to settle.

“So you have fallen, Alba,” Alaya mutters in a lifeless voice. He closes his eyes. At first he is in the unlit hallway, but with a single thought, he feels himself fall through the floor as if diving through a deep sea, and seems to descend into slumber.

While Alaya’s body remains in the tenth floor, his consciousness travels downward. Without shape or form, he observes the state of affairs in the lobby on the first floor’s east wing. Present there is the mage Tōko Aozaki, as well as the boy called Mikiya Kokutō. Tōko is nursing the fallen boy’s wounds, but it seems Cornelius Alba cannot be found. It is just as he expected. He prepares to return his consciousness to his body, but something holds him back.

“Where are you going, Alaya? Scrying is in poor taste,” Tōko says with

a click of her tongue. Though formless, Tōko looks over her shoulder as though he sees Alaya. She is at the foot of the staircase, while he is observing from the top. As before, they find themselves confronting each other.

*Hmph. So you did indeed have a second puppet as I thought. And through it you have disposed of Alba. The heart I plundered from you was real, I know it to be. Does this mean you are a mere fake?*

Alaya's voice echoes throughout the lobby. But there is no sound. It is a reverberating voice only Tōko can hear. Upon hearing Alaya's question, Tōko sighs.

"First Alba, then you. Both of you sure like fussing over the little details. Always asking 'what's the difference between then and now,' and never anything productive. I wonder how long you plan to take the questions this time."

*The propensity of your mouth to utter irritations seems unchanged, at the very least. Then will you duel with me once more?*

"No, thanks. I've got no chance of winning in this apartment building," speaking frankly, Tōko turns her attention away from the mage's presence, deciding that nursing the unconscious boy is more important than maintaining her conversation with Alaya. She produces a bandage from beneath her brown trench coat and begins to dress the wound in the boy's knees.

*Is your decision true? The familiar you contain within that box is capable of defeating me.*

"I humbly decline. If I just cut this familiar loose, it might well consume the entire building. The Ordo Magi would definitely notice, and they wouldn't let that slide. After all the trouble I went through occulting myself here, I wouldn't want all of that to go to waste." Tōko doesn't look over her shoulder when she answers him. "I lost when I died. I accept that. Whether you acquire Shiki's body and cast of your own or not, I don't care. If there were someone able to stop you, it wouldn't be me."

*Do you still rely hopelessly on the Deterrent this late in the game? I have told you before that it will not function.*

Tōko shakes her head, in pity more so than repudiation. "Maybe so. Maybe you've actually won this time. I don't know what you'll do when you reach the spiral of origin. They told us that the mages who reached the realms above remained, never to return to the material world below, sloughing off their memory of it like dry skin. But you fancy yourself different, don't you? You'd reshape reality, cast your shadow here on this side. As above, so below. You think you hate humanity so much that you want to save them. If that were true, you'd will yourself from existence after your ascension. But you don't really hate humanity, Alaya. You only love

the notion of the Platonic human you think you harbor within you. It's why you can't forgive the world of suffering you see. It's hilarious, too, how you think you want to save them. But you only want to save your delusional self."

Alaya does not immediately respond. At this point, any common cause they thought they shared, and what Alaya thought he could appeal to, is now well and truly broken. When he speaks, he speaks in a tone of grief.

*Then there is little else to speak about. For I see only one way to salvation. Farewell, Aozaki. I cannot leave any proof of my arrival at the spiral of origin. Only content yourself with the knowledge that you were the one that endeavored to stop me, and find meaning in that.*

The mage's consciousness starts to fade from the lobby and the senses of Tōko Aozaki. Back still turned, she suddenly remembers a certain doubt.

"Wait, Alaya. I have one last matter to ask. You made this facsimile of the Taijitu to contain the *Taijitu*, didn't you?"

*Of course. I made this pocket reality primarily to keep Shiki Ryōgi from escaping. Everything else is an addendum to that objective.*

Though Alaya replies with an air of composure, Tōko starts to snicker, initially trying her hardest to hold it back. Unable to calm herself, the female mage begins to laugh loudly, and with mockery and humor, unrestrained and even somewhat disconcerting.

"Yeah, this building is just one big pile of sorcery, isn't it? A closed realm to hide Shiki and your experiment from the Ordo, from me, from the consensus. A prison! A prison to keep the Deterrent from acting. Up until that point, your theory is watertight, Alaya. But what a pity! You have committed your gravest mistake yet."

Alaya is at a loss at grasping the meaning of Tōko's words. I made no mistake. His voice is without hesitation, a self-affirmation. Tōko tries to answer as she holds back bouts of laughter.

"Yes. True. Perfect weaving, for any mage's spell. But think back, Alaya. What if your assumption itself was wrong? You isolated Shiki not in a room in this building, but within the building itself, didn't you? A spell bordering on sorcery that cuts her off from regular space, trapping her in a lemniscate space, rendering anyone incapable of escaping. A prison that won't break no matter which weapon one uses. It's a finely woven pattern for one versed in the arcanum of the wards such as you. You think you have trapped her, and your guard slackens. But you see, Alaya, it is no proof against her. We mages might be an abhorrence of reality, a paradox on the pattern of the world, but Shiki is a reaper for beings as uncommon as us. Even now, she works against you!"

Her words unsettle the observing mage, and he feels his mind seem to stop. Certainly, Shiki's talent lies not only in the killing of physical things. The many weapons that humanity has created are tools enough for such purpose. It is her ability to bring entropy upon things that don't even know the concept of "life" as we know it, concepts and thoughts without form, bringing the ultimate void to bear.

*The one that brings entropy to all things.* That is her ability. She is contained in an infinite span of nothingness. Without form, Alaya thought the space would keep her safe from anything that would extract her physically. But the Arcane Eyes that Shiki Ryōgi holds grants her power over that formlessness as well. And so, Alaya realizes too late.

"Now is your blunder obvious, Alaya? It might actually have been better for you to trap Shiki in a concrete cell. Matter with form takes its toll harder on her when she weaves entropy, and is the reason she uses a weapon. Though I doubt even a material prison would have kept her for long. But your flimsy cage is not so solid. You treated her as you would a mage, but now your oversight is costing you, as she now tears it apart tooth and nail slowly but with the ease of shredding meat. And soon, you will be witness to her escape!" With her final sentence, Tōko finally looks back over her shoulder at Alaya. Before he can comprehend what her eyes told him, his consciousness fades and is fished back into the body that contains it.

As Alaya is pulled back into his body, he senses in it the rumblings of an irregularity. There is coldness in it that he has never before felt, and his fingertips grow numb from it. The sweat on his forehead mocks the chill running through his body, even as his insides seem to completely stop, shouting to him of some impending peril.

*It has been severed,* he thinks in protestation, unbelieving. But he is now face to face with the truth of the matter. For he senses the place, somewhere in this building, where something has just torn its way free. It is the closed space he'd constructed, now destroyed in a single unwavering stroke.

Though Alaya's will controls his body, it also has sympathetic correspondence with the almost living properties of the building. The framework his flesh; the wiring his nerves; the pipes his veins and arteries. And the pain of it being cut reflects and finds its way back to roost in its owner, a pain so great that even Alaya cannot ignore it, the proof of it lying in the loss of concentration that forced him to close his scrying spell on the first floor lobby and return to his body, as if compelled by some forceful arm.

"What is happening?" he murmurs as he wipes the sweat off his brow with an arm. Chills trickle down his spine, little spiders crawling up and down with their tiny legs. It is the herald of a nauseating emotion that he has not felt in many, many years. "Be still, Sōren Alaya," he scolds to himself for his moment of weakness.

But the phenomenon he feels doesn't stop. The arcane power that only moments ago he channeled through every fabric of his body seems to grow dim, and he cannot bring his fingertips to change the threads of reality's weaving, as mages do.

He feels death given form draw closer and closer.

Unexpectedly, a deep rumbling sound can be heard. It comes from beyond the hallway Alaya stands in now, echoing from the lobby. It is the distinct and familiar sound of the elevator in operation, bringing something up towards the tenth floor. It is not long before the rumbling noise stops, and silence returns, only to be broken again by the sound of the elevator door opening. Now a soft, dry noise, repeating. Footfalls from shoes resounding from the marble floor, their metronomic click growing louder, coming closer.

Wasting no time, Alaya directs himself back to the lobby. And then, though finding it hard to believe, he sees who it is that comes. She appears before him, the light of the lobby behind her forcing the figure into a silhouette, but it is easy enough to see the white kimono, and the accompanying leather jacket that clearly does not match it. It is easy enough to see the raven hair, looking wet and unkempt as if its owner had just emerged from a long slumber in a lake. And the normally black eyes of the void, now burning with an Arcane blue. In one hand she holds the hilt of the sword being drawn slowly, lovingly from its scabbard in her other hand. Even in the oppressive dark of night, the blade glints. Sword drawn, she swings it lazily across her to rest at her side as she walks forward, gliding ethereally like a soldier in a bloody battlefield.

Bringing the tranquility that heralds death in her presence, Shiki Ryōgi has returned.

## Chapter 18

Shiki stops walking just outside the entrance to the corridor. Sword pointed downward at the floor, she sees the black-coated mage Sōren Alaya from afar, separated from each other by a distance of about ten meters.

"I do not understand. How did you destroy my ward, Shiki Ryōgi?" Alaya says, his face grimacing in pain. It is the question that he has already repeated many times in his mind. And though he suspects knows the answer, he still asks it so that the gravity of it becomes more real.

The girl before him now is the same girl that only last night suffered broken ribs and lost her consciousness at his own hands. In the closed space that lay between the walls of the building, she awoke, breaking the barriers with the arms she used to weave her own variety of sorcery.

What is " " is antonymic to infinity. The concept of infinity is twinned with the concept of a finite existence. It is this finite existence, this end of all things that Shiki Ryōgi observes with her Arcane Eyes, and the same end that she cuts to make entropy act quickly, almost immediately. The prison she was contained in was made to be infinite, an inconceivable non-Euclidean space. But there is no true infinity. Only ends, driven by processes both mechanical and mystical. The only denial of the end that exists is the true nothingness of " ". To this girl, the space was nothing more than a room with its door unbarred and unguarded. It shames Alaya to admit it as such.

"Someone must have made you aware of it," he protests. "The injury I inflicted was far too severe for it to have healed already. Why does that body move? Why did you awake despite your wounds? Why did you not stay in slumber for only a precious few minutes more?" Alaya's voice is rough, the only sign he has yet given of any anger he can present. The barrier never mattered, he thinks, but had she only kept her peace for a few more minutes, all would have been settled.

*Did she come back to life by herself, or did someone assist her? The question rings again and again in Alaya's mind. Did someone wake her, make her aware she was imprisoned, and told her the secret to setting herself free? The damnable Art of Tōko Aozaki? No, she'd have had no time, having to duel me in the first time, and Alba in the second.* His face shows him in deep thought, running over the possibilities. He looks at the palm of his hand, the same hand that wiped Tomoe Enjō off completely only minutes ago. Perhaps the most decisive minutes he ever gave.

"It was Tomoe Enjō, was it not?" Alaya guesses, spitting out the name like a powerful curse.

Shiki only shakes her head in disagreement. “Nah, Enjō didn’t have a thing to do with waking me up. No one did. Woke up by my own self. Enjō didn’t even need to come here,” she says quietly. The wind blowing from the open hallway behind Alaya makes his greatcoat ruffle, and Shiki’s hair sway. “But to give him some credit, he’s the reason you failed.”

When Shiki says this, Alaya’s dark eyes narrow in curiosity as he ponders on what she said. Assuming something would be able to stop him, it would have been Shiki or Tōko Aozaki. Not the actor being pulled along on its strings.

“Impossible,” Alaya declares. “He could not do anything. He played his part well as a puppet, to bring you here.”

“True, he may have never had any real chance. But can you let go on the whole ‘he was always a puppet’ thing? You’re like the biggest guy in denial if you just keep saying it.”

Alaya cannot reply, for he knows it is true. When Tomoe Enjō escaped from the cycle he had set, Alaya thought that he could be used. He integrated him into his plan, adjusting it to allow for what he would do. But his escape itself was never part of the original plan. Wouldn’t that agency go against what Alaya had been saying all along? And it had slipped past him, even allowed him to affect the plan that he had long drawn up.

“You saw that little chink in your plan and decided to use it,” Shiki says. “But that one little mistake put a lotta holes in it. I mean, he’s the one that brought me here, wasn’t he? And guess who’s wrecking your party now? Just him escaping was already plenty significant.” She advances one step forward, sluggishly, almost drunkenly, and it throws the black-coated mage off enough for him to hesitate readying his arm as he usually would.

Alaya senses something wrong, something different about her. He does not know where she learned the knowledge of Tomoe Enjō’s destruction, and can only guess. The emotion emanating from her is...hate? A *trifling difference*, Alaya considers. *Mere change in her thoughts does not bridge the gap between our ability*. And yet, Alaya cannot help but see her as an entirely different being.

Shiki continues her ponderous advance. She doesn’t even look like she is ready to fight. She speaks again.

“Honestly, I don’t give a damn about you. But you gave me a hard time a few days ago, and I’m thinking maybe it’s time to pay you back. And so you’ll die here, tonight.” Her gaze is sleepy, her eyes less sharp. “But you know what? This is the first time that I’m not really excited about killing someone. Even though I know this round’s gonna go down to the wire, I can’t even laugh.”

The sword in Shiki's hand clicks as her previously lax grip on it suddenly changes into a more firm, more secure purchase on the grip. Advancing slowly, she maintains her forward gaze as the sword rests beside her, hilt at waist level and pointing downwards. This finally makes the mage raise his hand, deploying the three circular lines that traditionally surround him in a perimeter.

"Very well. If this is what you desire," Alaya says as he readies himself. "Killing you will only delay me shortly in the grand scheme of things. I should never have hoped to capture you alive from the very beginning. I will find a way to revive you, and transfer my soul. Though this body may expire, it is a small price to pay to reach the spiral of origin."

Shiki doesn't answer, but instead stops her advance when she sees the circular perimeter. The distance between them has closed somewhat. The outermost circle in Alaya's threefold perimeter extends a four meter radius from him. Shiki stops two meters beyond the perimeter. Briefly, the mage can sense Shiki's thirst for blood shift from winter cold to summer heat, feels it wrap around the corridor and make his hair stand on end. But even sensing this intimidating change in her, even knowing the age, quality, and pedigree of the sword she holds in her hand, he is confident in Shiki's defeat. Her swordplay will not avail her today.

But Shiki senses something different. If the mage no longer thought that letting her live would be an option, he would not have allowed Shiki to close the distance the way she did. No, he would have killed her from afar outright. Alaya still holds out hope that he can still take her alive, and it is that little detail, Shiki thinks, that gives her the advantage.

Halted just outside the wards that Alaya deployed, Shiki readies herself. Her second hand grips the hilt of the sword. Her back lowers slightly, and her center of mass along with it, arching herself in a stance ready to spring. All traces of the languor that possessed her previously is now well and truly gone. She brings the sword front and center, pointing it angled with the tip leveled at her enemy's throat. The most basic stance of any discipline of swordplay.

Facing the mage, she closes her eyes and nods in understanding. "Now I know," she says softly. "I don't really want to kill you. It's just that I can't stand the thought of you existing." Her last thoughts for Tomoe's killer.

The scent of murder is high in the air, and both Alaya and Shiki smell it, letting it pass over their entirety in one sweet instant. In the next, the invisible signal for battle is given, and the duel begins.

A flash, then Shiki's eyes open.

Alaya channels his mana into his outstretched hand, his motivating force in this fight not the confidence which infused him in previous conflicts, but instead the rare, almost foreign emotion that gripped him since he saw Shiki walking the lobby: the emotion of dread. Which is why he feels he must kill her here, now.

"**SHUKU!**" he roars angrily, clenching his hand into a fist, defining a space around Shiki that he would crush. The lag between the lorica and the weaving of the spell is so small as to be nonexistent, and one casting of it should be enough to dispose of the girl.

But Shiki is fast, anticipating his spell. In a flash the sword is raised high above her head, the speed blindingly fast. With the swiftness with which she raised her sword, she lets it fly downward in a vicious slash. The spell manifests only for a moment, but Shiki kills it, just as surely as the ringing sound of her blade cutting air seems to cancel out Alaya's booming voice.

The mage attempts to repeat the spell. He need only open his palm again, and then close it. But it is too slow for him to react properly. He hasn't even spoken, hasn't even entered the spell's weaving in his mind, when Shiki displaces from her position. She shifts the sword to her side at waist level—a side stance that allows for wide swings—and sprints to her target. Before the fight, Alaya considered the loss of one ward to be acceptable, thinking to take Shiki with the second. But now her blinding advance eliminates two of the wards in quick succession; two steps forward and two slashes swung gracefully from both flanks. And still she advances. She has just closed the previously six meter gap into zero. One more step, one more breath, timed with one more strike to end the game.

The sword comes from Alaya's right flank, and he sees the blade flow in a diagonal cut. Her speed almost seems to make time flow in discrete events rather than arbitrary measurements of seconds. The attack is similar to her previous two blows, and its telegraphed nature allows Alaya to dodge it by jumping back deeper into the hallway, widening the distance between the two. A brief pause as the mage studies his opponent with a glance.

From Shiki's lips, a single, straight line of fresh blood runs from mouth to chin. But Alaya knows she has taken no blow yet. Then it must be yesterday's wound. The broken ribs, the internal organ damage. Still in their fragile healing state, they must have been reopened, and even walking forces blood from her throat. She is clearly injured, and yet she dances with such single-mindedness. Alaya lets the right arm rest at his side.

That is, until he realizes there is no more arm. From the top of his shoulder all the way to his right chest, the clear traces of a clean strike can be

seen, and on the floor lies his missing arm. His manipulation of space made the backstep he performed faster than any normal human, yet Shiki was still able to cut him with a strike so perfect that even the owner of the arm never noticed it until after the fact.

"What manner of creature—" Alaya leaves the question unfinished. Unmindful of the injury, he focuses on his enemy. The strike could have been fatal. If his third ward had not been present, the slash would have dealt him a blow that would no doubt cut him in two. But it had instead slowed down Shiki's strike enough to save him. But Alaya is instead simultaneously fascinated by Shiki's complete difference from the night of their first duel. *Is it anger from what he did to Enjō? No, surely not.* He narrows his gaze at the girl in the white kimono.

Suddenly, she straightens herself and recovers a hand from the grip of the sword, releasing her tensed stance, suddenly turning back into the girl of last night. The recovered hand cups her mouth, and she coughs twice. The hand drips regurgitated blood. *If she did not have to fight such severe wounds, Alaya ponders, she would give me no respite.*

"You change with the weapon you hold," the black-coated mage observes in astonishment. It is the reason she seems so different. Her extensive training in the dance of the sword changes her, forcing her into an almost trance-like state. Her mind compartmentalizes much like, as Alaya suspects, the past warriors did by training their mind to shape their bodies as a weapon. The fight was killing and survival, outside it was normalcy. "Hmph. A form of autohypnosis, as mages do when working the Art," he mutters, his voice struggling to hold back the pain from his right arm.

Shiki shrugs. "Whatever you wanna call it, I guess."

Alaya curses his own dismissal of her sudden shift in demeanor. *When she opened her eyes; that's when it must have occurred. To think the Ryōgi dynasty would still teach such vulgar disciplines.* He knew too that Shiki bridging the space between them in what almost seemed like one step was no coincidence. Her movement, the sway of her sword, her attention, all focused and refined to make her a deadly living weapon, and she was the only one who knew about it. He had thought her tools to be only the Arcane Eyes of Death Perception and her knife, but in truth, her skill with the sword is far greater.

"You have fooled me, Shiki Ryōgi. I had thought you had revealed all you could about your skill in combat when you danced with Fujino Asagami. But I see you have this one last trick." Shiki shakes her head slowly in reply. Whether it is an affirmative or a disparaging negative, Alaya can't say. "And so we meet properly at last," he shouts as he pressed down on the gaping

wound of his former right arm.

The girl in the white kimono reveals a smile, the first truly gentle smile she has performed; a smile that signals the end. Returning to her original hard posture, she runs toward Alaya like a loosed arrow. He knows that Shiki can read him now, knows what to expect, and so he won't be able to dodge this next strike. But he won't allow her to press the advantage so easily, not here in his sanctum. He gambles his chances on meeting Shiki's advance. He steps forward, and shouts.

**“DAKATSU!”** In time with this, Alaya raises his left arm in an attempt to block Shiki's attack. He hopes that the *sarira*—the sacred remains of devout masters—embedded within, will ward away most of the damage the slash will inflict. Even she will not easily be able to see the lines of entropy. Shiki's sword impacts his arm, and in an instant, Alaya can see that the blow has been checked.

As soon as he realizes this, he wastes no time in his next move. He animates his severed arm with an improvised working of the Art, making the arm move toward Shiki with unnatural speed. It slithers along the floor until, when it nears Shiki, it springs up and grabs her by the throat, pressing hard and choking her.

Shiki drops her guard at the move she couldn't anticipate, and Alaya presses the advantage he has momentarily gained. He retreats one step to pull back the left arm that warded off Shiki's previous attack, and extends it again with open palm right in front of Shiki.

**“SHUKU!”** He clenches his fist, and tightens space yet again. Shiki feels her body crumpling with a compelling force seeming to come from all places at once, and an audible grunt of pain finally escapes her lips. The leather jacket is torn away, and she is forced away from where she stood, Alaya having manipulated the space to compress to a size far smaller than it appeared to be.

At first, Shiki actually looks like she will fall hard to the floor from the attack, but she catches her footing just in time. Quickly, she redoubles her attack, the corridor funneling her into a singular path directly toward Alaya again and again. For a moment, she seems to disappear from Alaya's sight, but she has only bent low and run fast toward him, getting under his guard more quickly than he can react. The sword moves in a blur, and it instantly strikes Alaya right in his center of mass.

The mage can feel his accumulated life ebbing away for only a fleeting instant. “Fool!” shouts Alaya as he attempts to deliver a kick towards Shiki's midsection to ward her away. It's an move easy to see, and so Shiki handily dodges it by jumping widely to the side, but the blade slides out of its shal-

low cut as she moves.

Alaya now understands. *If I want to stop her, the structure will have to go with it!* The mage opens his left hand to crush space for the third time. Having gained some distance from the jump, Shiki easily sees the spell coming. A quick but violent slash prevents it from manifesting any further around her. But after the slash, she stands stock still.

Alaya has completely vanished, black greatcoat and all.

*Nothing I can do about whatever magic he uses to move around,* thinks Shiki. *If he wants to run, I'll let him run.* She runs to the edge of the hallway, with the view of the outside, and puts a hand on the railing as she casts her eyes below to find her target.

*But he's not gonna get away this time.* Without hesitation, Shiki leaps over the edge.

Away from Shiki, Alaya begins to crush the building itself. It might damage Shiki's body, the same body he planned on using, but as long as he can still restore it to some semblance of a human function, then let its shape be damned. Even if the skull is shattered and the gray matter scattered, it can be replaced. What matters to him is that the body not expire completely until he works upon it, so that he can tap the soul connected to the spiral of origin.

The loss of his arm and the stab on his chest are nothing compared to the ultimate goal, the ars magna to which he has struggled toward these many years. As long as he reaches the spiral of origin, where everything begins and ends, all is well. What he must do remains the same, only delayed now.

*This seems to be the only option now to prevent a stalemate between us,* Alaya thinks. *Had I only killed her outright, it would not have come to this. Still, it has come, and I must close this chapter of her life.*

Weaving the Art and relocating him through space, Alaya has placed himself in the garden outside the building, which as far as he is concerned, feels like stepping out of his own body. He sees the greenery that surrounds the building often, but it has been so long since he has set foot in it. Though a part of the grounds, the dominating will of his subjective reality that strengthened him so much inside has little effect here. After he emerges from his relocation, he wastes no time. He looks up and extends his remaining arm skyward to point to the very top of the cylindrical structure, opening his palm.

The next thing he knows, a vicious cut goes straight down and through his left shoulder.

The next thing he knew, a vicious cut went straight down and through his left shoulder.

"Shiki...Ryōgi," he manages to gurgle out with difficulty as he looks up at the night sky. "You damned...fool of a woman." He coughs, and blood emerges red and blooming from his mouth. Not given a chance to land on either himself or Shiki, the droplets of blood are carried away on the wind only a few feet away, but now a distance he can no longer traverse. "All this...impossible."

Alaya had emerged in the grounds outside the building, looked up at the structure to work his spell, only to meet the fleeting sight of Shiki Ryōgi falling rapidly from the tenth floor. Which means there was little interval between the mage's weaving of his relocation spell, and the girl's thoughtless descent from the highest floor of the building. What confidence possessed her at that moment, he will never know. He suspects he would never be able to know. How could Shiki have known that he would appear in the grounds outside? And even given this, who would even think to jump off and think they would land safely? To aim and hit a lone man from that height at that nearly uncontrolled fall is an act that has gone well past recklessness and into the realm of some miraculous foresight. As if she'd known.

And yet she did it. Without Alaya not having even completed the spell, having not even manifested in the garden yet, she jumped and did it. And at almost the exact same time as he appeared, he was struck by Shiki's blow. The arm that he had extended upward very quickly became an improvised shield, but it was not enough to stop the slash from landing in his left shoulder, reaching all the way to his abdomen. Even the arcane shield that the *sarira* in his arm had afforded him was not enough to stop the sheer force of it.

As for Shiki, she is unconscious and still, standing but leaning on the blade inside Alaya's body. Ironically, for all the defenses Alaya put up—his arm, the protection of the *sarira*, and the last ward that he had managed to erect at the last moment—Shiki broke through all of them and they served only to cushion her fall. Without them, the fall would have been fatal at worst, or aggravated her internal damage and killed her eventually at best. Another miracle.

Her grip on the sword is tight as rigor mortis. Alaya's brow clouds his already anguished face as he looks upon the unconscious Shiki. "You were prepared to risk it all on one gamble to kill me. No, if not through this, than

through another way, surely. You could kill me. Perhaps it was no risk at all. It is a poor sight to see Sōren Alaya defeated by a neophyte such as you." His words this time finally ring without his previous posturing.

Alaya's left arm is virtually severed, and the right is long gone. The mage, still standing, kicks the unconscious Shiki away, striking her chest. Her body flies away from him and a few feet deeper into the grounds. But Shiki continues to cling tightly to the sword hilt, even as it is still embedded in the mage's body. So the blade, having also been weakened by the impact of the fall, is now forced into two: one half remaining embedded in Alaya's body, and the other half in Shiki's possession. And with that, the four hundred years of its history come to an end.

Shiki, now collapsed on the garden soil, remains unmoving. Looking at her with displeasure, he mutters. "You lie there finally wearing the look of a girl your age." The mage, too, is unmoving as his face grows dark. The last bit of his energy has been expended in kicking Shiki away, and now he can't do anything. For he feels that the slash has struck more than just the body: one of his lines of death must have been cut. "Through that appearance, I know we will never do battle again."

The mage dispels the ward that is already fading fast, and whispers to himself in a sort of prayer. "My origin is known to me. It is quiescence. Those whose origin is awakened returns soon to the spiral."

## Chapter 19

Only the moonlight shining above seems alive in this green fakery of a lawn. Here, Shiki lies, fallen and unconscious, while a fair distance away is the mage in the black greatcoat who has lost both arms. Stepping out of the shadow of the shadow of trees and foliage is another mage, walking collectedly with the air of one heading home after a simple stroll.

"So this, too, ends in failure, Alaya," says Tōko. Alaya provides her no reply. "A cruel state you find yourself in. You began your chronicle of death, created your own twisted world, carried the weight of anguish that all the people in it experienced. And for what? Why did you have to be so obsessed? Why do you seek the spiral of origin so selflessly? Did you dream, as you once did, of saving this race of men?" Her voice is pitying, almost sad in her own way.

A pause. A beat. Then, "The reason is long lost to memory." He retreats within himself, to remember.

In a long forgotten time, he realized that he could not save anyone. As long as there is life, there will be no real justice. Joy will not be realized for all men. What of the individuals who cannot find their salvation? Is there no answer to them? The dice game played by God did not seem to bring justice to the right individuals, and when he realized this, he realized that salvation does not come naturally to this world.

And so he decided to chronicle deaths. Make a record of all until their end, and until this material world expires. Through it, he can sift through the patterns and discern what real happiness is. If he could see the streams tracing out into the infinite, observe all those whose lives lacked for justice and deliverance, then perhaps he could arrive at something that could be called true joy. Perhaps he could give meaning to all the meaningless deaths. If the world and everyone in it reached their end, then he could observe the true worth of mankind. And even in the simplicity of that observation, there was value. That was the only common salvation he could find for him and man.

At the scratching sound of Tōko lighting up a cigarette with a lighter, Alaya's reverie is broken.

"Lost to memory, huh? I wonder, then, what to make of you," Tōko says.

"I was never capable of anything grand. I only ever desired a definitive conclusion. If the sole matter that these mortals could ever leave to history is the ugliness of their existence, then at the very least I can declare that that is their worth. If I could observe that a lifetime of injustice is their

legacy, then I have at least observed it, and it would have been enough,” Alaya says, without looking at Tōko directly. Tōko does the same, staring up with disdain and a frown at the night sky.

“Which is why you had to reach the spiral of origin. Yes, I see it now. Because there lies the record of everything, from beginning to end, and there you could observe it. You wanted everyone to die to observe the worth of humanity from your little perch high above everyone.”

“Only a few steps remained to be taken, but again reality had to have its way. It taunts me by presenting me with the vessel to open the path, only to have it hinder my progress. Truly an unstoppable force. Though I took pains so that no one would know it, so that no one would trigger the paradox that would scour this pocket realm from the pattern of reality; Even when I was prepared, I was stopped. This force that ensures the continued existence of the world was my true enemy.” Alaya’s words come out in rasps and rough bursts of stuttered words. He is already starting to ebb away.

Tōko sighs deeply. “Reality? No, Alaya. This time it wasn’t the Deterrent that stopped you. You did what you could do perfectly, and the Deterrent did not act. Believe it or not, you were—indirectly at least—done in by Tomoe Enjō and the simple affection he still held for his family.”

But Alaya refuses to believe that he was defeated by such a simple thing; he, who had deceived reality and made it his enemy. “Even if that were true, it must have been the Deterrent that empowered him so; made him make the decisions and courses of action that would lead him to my defeat. He did not act out of love for his family. Humans act only out of survival, and hide it with such pithy decorations as affection.” The hatred in his voice is thick, but Tōko only shrugs it off.

For she understands that Alaya views himself not as a man now, but as the carrier of an ideal. A man driven so much and for so long as to become a symbol is no longer human as she knows it. Tōko remembers the time when she was a neophyte, when Alaya had made what once thought was a simple observation, but ultimately became his most profound: *the enemy of all mages is my enemy. My enemy is consensus*. Though she knows it is futile in these final moments to tell him, she continues her parting words to the friend and man she once knew.

“There’s one last thing I should tell you, Alaya. It’s pretty good. I don’t know if you know him, but a famous psychiatrist once had this idea of a collective unconscious. It’s the idea of a big mental pool where all the archetypes of humanity’s collective history and ideas reside. It should sound familiar to a Buddhist concept you already know. This is not the Gaia

theory, but similar to the consensus of collective humankind. Buddhists call it the *alaya-shiki*."

"Wh—what?" Alaya says, the word coming out haltingly. Tōko ignores him.

"Don't you find it strange, Sōren Alaya? You were born with a name that tied you always toward your objective, and you never knew it. As if reality itself snared you from the beginning. You wrought many paradoxes today, but it was you who were the grandest paradox of them all." Tōko's words bury themselves deep in Alaya's mind, encroaching on his thoughts to shake the foundations of what he stood for. Though he doesn't answer her, the intensity of his eyes start to fade. But his burdened expression still stands. *Until the end, probably*, Tōko thinks.

Without acknowledging Tōko's words, Alaya speaks. "This body has reached its end."

"And you'll start again from scratch, I presume. For what must be the nth time. You really are obstinate, you know that?" That life, Tōko knew, was also a spiral. Finally turning her frown to Alaya, she throws the cigarette on the ground and puts it out, never actually putting it in her mouth. She never really hated the man. Because she realizes quite seriously that if she had made just one mistake...or perhaps had not made a mistake, she would have become quite like him: someone not truly human, but just the avatar of an idea, devoted wholly to a single theory.

Alaya coughs violently, and blood comes out of his mouth yet again. Though delayed by the sheer weight of his years of life, Shiki's Eyes finally work their craft slowly but surely on Alaya's body, reducing it to a gray ash of decay starting from his left shoulder.

"I have no other vessel with which to ferry my soul. But the wheel turns, and when the cycle presses me back into the material world, it will be hundreds of years hence."

"At which point there will be no more mages, or the Art, or sorcery. The consensus is winning. And you are, as you always will be, alone. But I know you still wouldn't stop."

"Of course. I am not defeated."

Tōko closes her eyes, the years of their separation and their scant hours of catching up now both concluded. Eyes closed, Tōko Aozaki asks her last questions of Sōren Alaya.

"What do you seek, Alaya?"

"True wisdom." His arm fades into nothingness.

"Where do you seek it, Alaya?"

"Nowhere else but within me." As his left half turns to ash and dances

in the wind, the black greatcoat falls away. In Alaya's last moments, Tōko opens her eyes to see him through to the end.

"Where do your struggles lead you, Alaya?"

But before he can answer, the last of Sōren Alaya wastes away. Tōko feels, though, that she knows what he would have answered.

*Beyond this spiraling material world of paradox.*

Tōko casts her eyes away from the gray ash riding on the wind and takes another cigarette from her pocket and lights it. The smoke dances to and fro like an impossible, unreal illusion.

## I 20

Though I can't seem to recall the how and why, I find myself walking through the city. The weather is pleasant, and the sky above is blue as far as the eye can see. Though there isn't a cloud in the sky to cover the sun, the white, dream-like sunlight is warm but not truly bothersome. But it does cast the city and the main avenue in the faint haze of a mirage, bathing it in the atmosphere of some vast desert. Since November came around, it's always been cloudy day after cloudy day, but today, in my dark red kimono, it feels like a day right out of summer.

Eventually, I enter a café that I've been visiting a lot lately. The café, Ahnenerbe, seems much moodier than it usually is. Maybe it's because the quality of today's sunlight—the lack of electric light making sunlight from the windows its only method of lighting—only serves to make the shadowed parts much more pronounced. It's probably what the customers want anyway.

I see an unoccupied table, its surface plain and simple, beside an open window, being bathed by a stream of white sunlight. Right behind it is another table, where the light doesn't reach and is cast in dry darkness. This contrast that drapes an air of churchly solemnity about the entire thing is what makes the place popular among a certain crowd. Today, I'm part of that crowd.

The two tables I saw are the only ones that aren't taken, and I take a seat on the table by the window. By chance, I sit at the same time as another guy, a teenager who takes the other empty table. And so I wait, and the teenager waits as well, sitting with our backs to each other.

The silence is almost a miracle unto itself. I keep my peace like the rest of the people around me, and my normally short fuse doesn't manifest as I wait without complaint. While contemplating the reason for my rare silence, I find satisfaction in the fact that the person sitting behind me seems to be waiting in vain like I am. The fact that I have a kindred spirit somehow makes me feel at ease.

After a long time, the idiot I'm waiting for finally shows up, visible outside the window waving a hand at me. It looks like he ran to get here, seeing as he's out of breath. I wonder if he's okay. After all, he's the one that chooses to wear a black getup in such a fine, sunny day like this. He's going to have to change that sooner or later. I look again, and there is someone else outside the window: a woman in a white dress.

I stand up, and at the same time, the guy behind me stands up as well.

I feel some relief, as it seems the woman in the white dress is the person this guy was waiting for. With a sigh, I head for the café's exit. Strangely enough, the establishment has two exits on opposite ends, one on its east and another on its west side. As I walk toward the west exit, the guy walks similarly toward the east exit. Before I exit the café, I look over my shoulder once, only to see the guy looking over his shoulder as well. The fellow is red-haired, with a thin frame. When our eyes meet, he turns away and raises a hand. I too, turn away, and raise a hand. A greeting. And yet, though I hear no voice, I could almost imagine him saying goodbye. Voiceless, I too say goodbye, and make my way out of the café.

Outside, the atmosphere is still bathed in an oppressive white haze. The heat must have gotten stronger, as I feel like I could sweat in a matter of minutes. Under this intense sunlight, I walk toward the man waving his hand at me. For reasons I can't discern, I feel relieved and pained at the same time. Though I try to block out the sunlight with my hand, it is still strong enough to hide the man's face.

I pray to some God that the red-haired guy was also walking like this, to a place where he could meet that someone he was waiting for. The solemn air of a church inside Ahnenerbe must have really gotten to me if even I can catch myself praying. When I turn around to look back at it, the café is gone, replaced instead by a level plain stretching far away to the horizon. Nothing is left. Somehow, though, I knew it.

I once thought that to live was to leave nothing behind. But I remember what someone once said to me: that life is when you try to leave nothing behind, but instead leave everything.

Somewhere, a doorbell chime rings out. When I hear it, I realize that I am in a whimsical dream. Leaving behind the beautiful city of the desert, I slowly wake up.

The doorbell rings for a second time, and I push my body up from the bed. The clock beside the bed says that it's only around nine o' clock or so. Seeing as I went out last night for my usual stroll and slept at five in the morning, nine o' clock is hardly a perfect time to wake up.

The doorbell rings for a third time. Naturally, the only one who would be persistent enough to keep ringing like that would be someone who knows I'm here, and that someone is probably Mikiya. My mind is still swimming as I sit on top of the bed, recovering from a strange dream. All the more reason to ignore Mikiya right now. Let him think I'm asleep. I snatch the pillow from the head of the bed, hold it close, and lie back down again.

The ringing stops. "Hah. I knew he'd give up," I whisper as I pull my blanket back up and try to fall back to sleep.

Suddenly I hear the sound of the lock opening by key, and the door opens. I open my eyes in surprise and start to get up, but he's already in.

"Ah, so you *were* awake, Shiki," Mikiya says. He has in one hand a plastic bag from a convenience store. The thought of where on Earth he got a key to my apartment occupies me, and I don't manage to catch myself glaring at him fairly sternly.

"Don't think you get to have any of this," he suddenly sputters out as he hides the plastic bag behind him. "I need to eat my breakfast too." There is a second or two before I get what he's talking about, since I'm thinking of something completely different.

"Trespassing. That's what this is," I declare. "And me? Eat that cheap trash? Don't make me laugh."

"Oh, thank god, I get to have a breakfast at your place without you pinching food from my plate for once. Maybe you've beaten the habit." Mikiya starts to take out the food from the plastic bag and line them up on the floor. I pass a good minute just looking at him like this.

It's been two weeks since the business in the Ōgawa Apartments. Mikiya had to go to the hospital for his leg injury. My own injuries, which were far more serious, took only a week and a few days to heal, which the doctor attributed to my health. Mikiya still has to go to the hospital for checkups. He can walk, and even run, but the doctor said to avoid the latter until he was completely fine. I remember Mikiya laughing, then saying to the doctor that he tries to avoid running even without an injury.

We haven't talked about the Ōgawa Apartment once since. We didn't feel the need to. In the past two weeks, though, I can sometimes see Mikiya's face becoming more serious for what seems to be no reason, and you'd actually have to touch him for him to snap back to reality and hear you. It's those times that I know that he's thinking back on it. For my part, my mind keeps going back to the erstwhile roommate of one month that brought an unexpected change in my life, and it frustrates me.

"Um, you know," Mikiya suddenly says with hesitation. He's splitting his chopsticks with his back turned to me.

"What?" I ask dryly, already sensing what he would talk about.

"I heard from Miss Tōko that it's slated for demolition. The apartment, I mean."

"Is that so? But what about the residents? And the stuff there? All those things..." My voice trails off.

"Miss Tōko said not to worry about that. She said that 'mages take care

of mage business,' and that some guys from the Ordo came and handled all that. They made the fictional families disappear, putting them as 'moved' in the records. They even destroyed everything under the building. They're a pretty powerful bunch, if they can do all of that." He gulps. "They're going to demolish the building this noon, I hear."

So he came here to tell me that. I know I'm not going to see it; nor, I felt, would Mikiya. Still, he told me because he thought I should know.

"It's too soon," I murmur vaguely.

"It is, isn't it?" Mikiya says. And with those statements, it feels as though we ourselves consigned the Ōgawa Apartments to the past. "But at least all the reasons for these incidents centered on you must be over now. I know I've been an outsider to most of them, but this should be the end of them." He pauses, then, "You should go back to school regularly. If you don't get that high school diploma and graduate, you're gonna make Akitaka sad."

"What? Me going to school has nothing to do with the weird shit. First off, didn't these incidents only start to pop up after you got associated with Tōko? And second, remove the log from your own eye first before you start messing with splinters. How do you think you can get off lecturing me on going back to school when you've stopped going to college yourself?"

"Ouch, sucker punch to the gut right there," he mutters before smiling and sighing. Hah, that line never fails to shut him up.

And so we spend the morning together. Though it's both our days off, Mikiya decides to stay in my room instead of going out, while I lie in bed, badly needing sleep but staying awake just to keep the guy company. Mikiya is seated on the floor, his back resting on my bed behind him. A month ago, the scene was somewhat different.

My mind wanders back to the other man, seated where Mikiya is now. He's gone now, and this room has returned to the way it was before he was here. That he had to die makes me feel a pang of regret, a hollow in the soul. Though I tell myself it's only a small hole, it envelops me in a sensation as disquieting as what I had five months ago, when I recovered from the coma.

And then, a thought comes to mind unbidden. If him dying unsettles me this much, how much more so if the guy sitting beside my bed right now disappears? He's a part of both the *Shiki Ryōgi* of the past, and the new memories that started in June to the five months from then until now. It's a period of time filled with a lot of honestly trifling things, but even so, the memories deserve better than to just be thrown away. And so I keep them tucked away like little treasures in my soul.

I still have parts of my memory that I can't rightly remember. Hollows in

the soul, Tōko called it. I still remember her telling me in her best important-sounding voice: *a hollow has to be filled with something*. It's still as true now.

So, I wonder, when in these five months of personal episodes great and small did I find the time to decide that Mikiya would be that something?

"Say, Kokutō." I really hate the sound of that name, but I say it anyway. I've grown to see my past as an entirely different person, and started to dislike mimicking my past self. Still, the name, its sound and tone, is my last connection to the past I still can't let go completely. Mikiya obviously doesn't see the same significance in it as I do, since he doesn't turn to look at me. In one of the rare times I have something important to say, he's lost in one of his paperback literature classics. Typical.

I just say what I need to say anyway: "The key."

That gets his attention. "Hmm?"

I turn my face away from him and hold a hand out to him, a hand still marked with gashes by the sword hilt I held two weeks ago. This is just some impromptu thing I thought about, but I say it.

"I don't have a key to your room. That's not so fair."

I know I'm blushing like a kid as I ask for such a little thing, but I can't seem to stop it. I'll chalk it up to the weird dream I had before I woke up.

And so I let this normal, spiraling day pass like any other, keeping company with a person so peaceful he could never have damaged the serenity of the day.

The season is winter, and a rare snow falls upon the city, the first of its kind it has seen in four years.

Like the night *Shiki* Ryōgi and Mikiya Kokutō first met, the snow on the ground will in time be drenched with a vivid red.